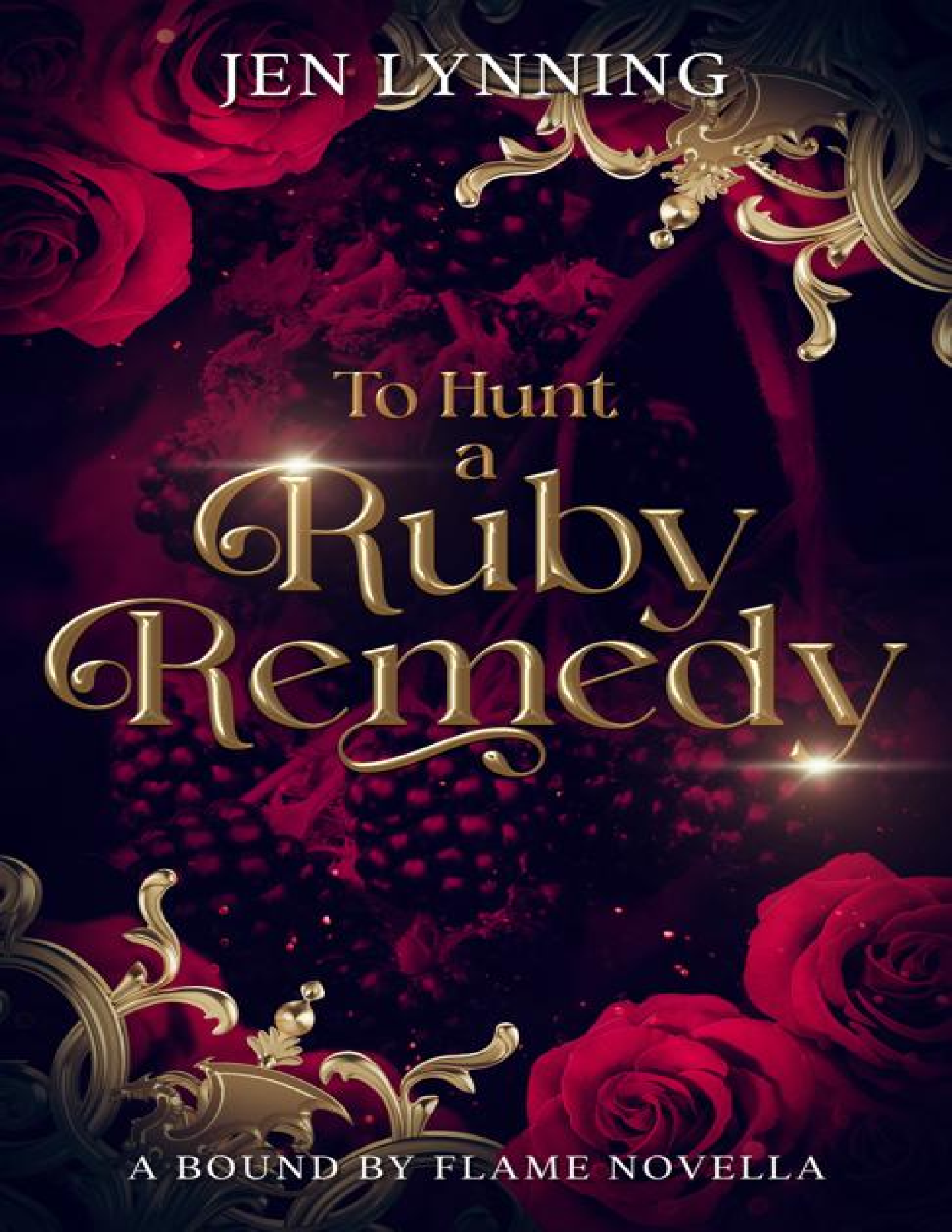
JEN LYNNING
To Hunt a Ruby Remedy
A BOUND BY FLAME NOVELLA

To Hunt a Ruby Remedy

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To Hunt a Ruby Remedy

JEN LYNNING

To Hunt a Ruby Remedy

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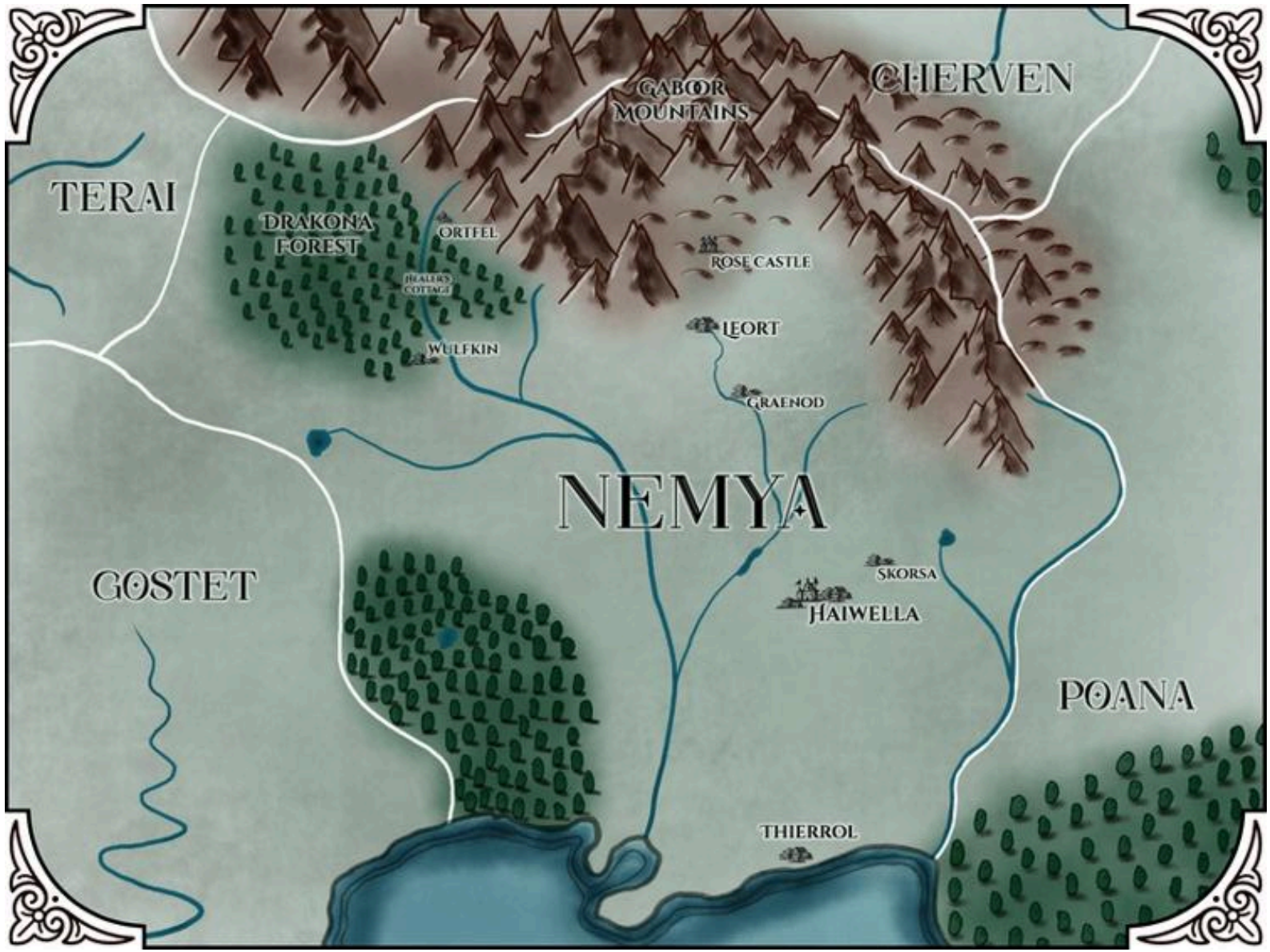
For everyone who believes
you can never be too old for fairy tales.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One

Scarlette

The cottage nestled in between the beech trees like it had grown there. The stone walls and roof made of clay tiles should have looked wrong in the middle of the forest, but instead, they fit perfectly. Charming, but not ordinary. No one stumbling across the house would be surprised to find it was situated on a magical node, the woman living inside a powerful healer who helped any who sought her out.

I had reached the end of my journey.

I walked up to the door and knocked. Then I waited. My hand slid into my pocket and gripped the nugget of glass within like the lifeline it was. The edges dug into my palm, the gently rounded corners of the cube a reassurance. Rosalia wouldn't have made me bring this if she thought her grandmother wouldn't make the charm.

The door swung open and revealed the scowling face of a man about my age. "What do you want?"

I gripped the cube tighter. The only thing soft and welcoming about this man was the thick black hair he left hanging loose to his shoulders. I wouldn't let his stare run me off. I had dealt with worse. He wasn't raging at me, and I had a mission.

I smiled as brightly as I could. "Beg your pardon. I'm looking for the healer. This is the right cottage, isn't it?"

The man stuck his head out the door and looked both directions. "You see any others it could be? Yes, this is the right cottage. I'm the healer."

"Oh." Had something happened to Rosalia's grandmother? I hoped not. For one, I would hate for anyone to lose a family member unexpectedly, even a relative stranger. I had lived with the fear long enough to have an idea of how devastating such news would be. More selfishly, though, I needed Grandmother Molle. "I'm sorry. You don't match the

description I was given. At all. I think I'm looking for a different healer. Is there another healer?"

The man continued to stand in the doorway, blocking my view of the interior of the cottage. Making my lack of welcome clear. "Depends. What description were you given?"

"A grandmother. Which you decidedly are not."

He almost smiled. I was certain he almost smiled. Then he spoke, and I knew it. "I am a bit young to be a grandmother."

"And rather . . . large." My smile grew. Rough edges or not, this man wasn't a danger.

He raised an eyebrow.

I wondered if I could coax a true smile out of him. "You have very big muscles for a grandmother."

This time, he snorted. "You clearly haven't met my grandmother."

He sighed and looked inside the cottage, then stepped out of the doorway. "Come inside. You can tell me why you are seeking her out. You know we sell healing charms in the village? There was no need to come all the way out here. I deliver the charms to Wulfkin for that reason."

I followed him into the main room of the cottage. The kitchen filled the back third, with a dining table and sitting area taking up the rest of the space. A hallway to my right led to the other rooms. The healer led me to the table, gesturing for me to take one chair before rounding to the other side.

"I need a very powerful charm." I pulled the glass cube out of my pocket and placed it on the table, pushing it closer to him. "Rosalia told me her grandmother could craft what I needed."

He picked up the glass and inspected it. "Of course she did. What kind of charm do you need that my twin couldn't craft herself?"

He was Rosalia's twin? There was a hint of family resemblance, I supposed, but plenty of people shared dark hair and green eyes without being related. I barely knew Rosalia, but it was hard to think of her growing up in the same environment as this man. Within a quarter hour of our meeting, she had been hugging me and offering to do everything she could to help.

I didn't even know his name yet.

"I'm Scarlette," I blurted, realizing I hadn't shared my name either.

Like everyone who heard my name, he took a moment to stare at my deep red hair. A simple kerchief kept it out of my face, but did little to hide the wavy strands and their distinctive color.

The healer stared a little longer than most before replying. “More crimson than scarlet. Or maybe blood-red.”

“I am happy with my name not matching the shade perfectly. I should hate to be named Blood.”

Again, he nearly smiled, but quashed the movement of his lips before it was more than a twitch. “What kind of charm do you need, Scarlette?”

“You aren’t going to tell me your name?”

“Will it help this get moving a little faster? The sooner you explain what you need, the sooner I can create the charm and send you on your way.”

He was nothing like Rosalia at all. “My understanding is that it will take several days, so yes, I would appreciate knowing your name.”

“Ranulf.” He placed the glass cube back on the table, the soft clink a surprisingly forceful reminder of what was at stake. “Now, what do you need?”

“There’s something wrong with my mother’s brain,” I said, staring at the clear glass on the table. That future charm was my last hope. “We had healers come multiple times. They healed her, and everything seemed fine. She was herself again, but the problem always came back. Rosalia was passing through the village and heard about us. She offered to do another healing session.”

We couldn’t afford to pay her. The first time a healer treated Mama, we had scraped together the funds without too much difficulty. It used up our savings, but we could pay. The second time, the villagers had helped. I saved every copper after that, certain we’d need a healer again. We put it off for as long as possible, but Mama’s symptoms grew worse. It reached the point where she couldn’t work. So, we summoned another healer from the city.

It took everything to pay him. Every copper I had saved, every item we could sell, every coin we could beg from sympathetic friends. I had known that we couldn’t do it again. If this healer didn’t cure Mama completely, that was it.

Then Rosalia came. She demanded to treat my mother, not caring that we couldn’t pay. We couldn’t do more than offer her a pallet to sleep on.

“She used some charm before she did the healing, examined Mama to find out what was wrong. She said there was some sort of growth causing the problems. A tumor. After she healed Mama, she examined her with the charm again. The growth was reduced, but not gone. She doesn’t think it is possible for it to be healed completely. Mama will need treatments for the rest of her life. We can’t afford that.”

“Thus, she sent you to Grandmother to get a charm to keep the tumor in check.”

“Yes. She said that even the power of the node wouldn’t be enough to cure Mama, but it could be used to make a charm strong enough to last for years. Mama’s headaches returned within a day; we had waited too long to get her healed that last time. Rosalia made a charm to help her, but it won’t last longer than a month.”

The healer hadn’t even been certain it would have enough power to keep Mama healthy enough to make the journey to Drakona Forest herself. I had to get the charm and bring it home. It was our last chance.

Ranulf sighed. “Grandmother is down in Ortfel. One of the women there is due any day now, and she’s had a difficult pregnancy. I don’t know when Grandmother will be back, but I can make your charm. To do what you want, it will take time. Probably about a week.”

It had taken me a week to travel from home to the healer’s cottage. It would take me another week to get back. The charm Rosalia had made would last long enough.

“Thank you.” I had mentioned my lack of money, but I had to make sure Ranulf understood. “I can’t pay you. The glass for the charm is all I have to offer. But I can work while I wait. Cleaning, cooking, that sort of thing. I know it won’t come even close to the value of the charm.”

“You’re not staying here.”

I flinched at his tone. There was no give, no room for misunderstanding. But I didn’t understand. Rosalia had assured me there was a guest room in the cottage. That her grandmother would welcome me and appreciate any help I could offer around the house.

But her grandmother wasn’t here. Ranulf was.

I should be thankful he wasn’t suggesting I pay for the charm by warming his bed. Not spending a week with him, isolated in the middle of the forest, should be a relief. I’d have no recourse if he wanted to

overpower me. But I had already decided he wasn't a danger, and I trusted my instincts.

And maybe, I admitted, taking in his broad shoulders and rugged jawline, he wouldn't have to overpower me.

But Ranulf didn't want me around. Instead of relief, I felt vaguely insulted.

And tired. My gaze darted to the windows and the sunshine slanting through the trees. I hadn't left right at sunrise that morning, so it was already mid-afternoon. It had never occurred to me that I'd have to return to the nearest village today. "The village is half a day's walk away."

Ranulf must have understood what I was thinking. "You can stay tonight, but tomorrow, you'll return to Wulfkin. I'll bring the charm there when I'm done."

I'd have to wait a week, uncertain of what was happening. If Ranulf didn't make the charm, would I have enough time to track down Grandmother Molle and get her help? Would Ranulf even give me back the glass cube needed for that charm? It was a risk I didn't want to take. Trusting him not to attack me wasn't the same as trusting that he would perform hours' worth of magic on my behalf for nothing.

I summoned my smile once more, realizing I had let it slip. "Wouldn't it be more convenient if I stayed here? I can take over the household chores, and you won't have to travel to and from the village, wasting a full day of your time."

"What would be convenient is not having you underfoot. If you want me to make the charm, then you need to return to Wulfkin tomorrow."

"Surely there is some way I could be of help here? I want to repay you whatever way I can."

"You can repay me by leaving." He closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. Apparently, even looking at me was too much for him. After several heartbeats, he lowered his hand and looked at me with forest green eyes. "I have a batch of charms and enchantments that need to go to the village. You can bring them with you when you leave, all right? That can be the favor you do in return for getting a charm."

I kept my smile in place and nodded. Perhaps, if I made myself useful in the interim, I could convince him to let me stay tomorrow morning.

Two
Ranulf

I woke up to the scent of fresh bread. The enticing aroma permeated every corner of the attic bedroom that had become my refuge yesterday afternoon. I had finished carving the last enchantments I wanted to send to Wulfkin, pulling magic from the node to imbue the wooden discs with healing spells. I had successfully avoided Scarlette, grabbing a bowl of soup from the pot over the fireplace and carrying it upstairs with me for supper rather than staying at the table.

Something told me that she wouldn't leave if I hid up here any longer. If I wanted her gone—and I did—I needed to go downstairs and push her out the door. I groaned and rolled out of bed. The sooner she returned to Wulfkin, the better.

Also, I wanted to try the bread. It smelled even better than the loaves my grandmother made.

I dressed quickly and climbed down the narrow staircase that led to my bedroom, my dirty bowl from last night in one hand, the basket of magical talismans hanging from my arm. The instant I had opened the trapdoor, the scent of the bread had become even stronger, and my mouth was watering by the time I walked down the hall and into the main room of the cottage.

"Good morning!" Scarlette was dressed in the same clothes as yesterday. Her dark blue skirt swished around her ankles as she turned to greet me. Bright yellow flowers decorated the bodice that cinched tight at her waist and flared over her hips. A sky-blue kerchief corralled her hair.

I wanted to walk over, tug the kerchief off, and run my fingers through her ruby red tresses while I kissed her senseless. Everything about her had sparked my interest when I threw open the door yesterday. There was the purely physical, of course, but that wasn't all. Her lips begged to be kissed because of the way she held onto her smile no matter the provocation. I

wanted to wrap her in my arms because she refused to admit any weakness. She was the embodiment of goodness and joy.

She was the last thing I wanted to be reminded of every time I turned around. I saw no point in caving to temporary desires. But my conviction didn't change the fact that she was a temptation. I needed her gone as soon as possible. Before the dream morphed into a nightmare.

When I didn't say anything, Scarlette filled the silence herself. "I made bread. I saw the starter, found the flour, and since there wasn't an old loaf, I figured you would appreciate a fresh one. I also gathered the eggs from the chickens." She pointed at the bowl on the counter.

"When did you wake up?" It sounded like an accusation, even to me. I never was good at friendly. In this case, I was glad for my lack of social skills. Maybe she'd leave sooner.

She smiled at me. "I've always been an early riser."

I hadn't believed that someone's smile could light up a room before. But yesterday—and now—Scarlette's smile did just that. It wasn't that she didn't have shadows. I had seen the sorrow, the worry, when she spoke of her mother's illness. Then I had seen her banish those shadows, just like she did now.

I didn't want Scarlette's light shining on me. Sooner or later, the darkness would return. When it did, it would make the memories of brightness even worse. It was better to hide in the shadows.

I set my bowl in the sink and noticed that there were no dishes there. In fact, the entire kitchen looked much cleaner than it had yesterday afternoon. I wasn't a slob. Even with Grandmother gone these past few days, I had kept the cottage clean. But I preferred to do all the dishes at once in the evening. And I didn't think the counters had ever looked as clean as they did right then. I didn't even know wood could sparkle.

I pulled the basket from my arm and shoved it at Scarlette. "Here. These are the charms and enchantments to take to the village."

She took the basket and reached for the cloth covering the top.

"Don't touch them. You don't want to activate an enchantment accidentally and make it waste all its magic."

Her hand snapped back as if slapped. "Sorry."

"Just . . . take them to Wulfkin." I tried to find a modicum of self-control. The bruised look in Scarlette's brown eyes was too much, even for me. "Please."

“Wulfkin. Right.” Her smile wavered, then steadied, but it wasn’t as bright as before. “You’ll have the charm ready for me in a week?”

Her mother’s life depended on this charm, I knew. I tried to gentle my tone without letting her think my resolve had softened. “I’ll bring it to you in one week.”

She nodded. “I suppose I should be on my way, then. Thank you.”

She hitched the basket into the crook of her elbow and turned toward the front door.

I glanced over at the table at the loaf of fresh bread. Uncut. Then I looked at the full bowl of eggs on the counter next to me. “Wait.”

She turned back, and Ward protect me, there was so much hope in her eyes. I tried to ignore it. “You haven’t eaten. It’s a long walk to Wulfkin. You should have breakfast first.”

“I’m—”

“Sit down.”

She sat. Then she jumped back to her feet when I grabbed two eggs from the bowl. “I can—”

“So can I. You already made bread. If you must do more, you can slice it while I boil the eggs.” I pumped water into a pot and hooked it over the fireplace. Scarlette had already built it up to a good blaze to bake the bread in the cast-iron pot over the coals, so it didn’t take long for the water to boil. I slid the eggs into the pot and pulled the kettle off the fire. A few minutes later, Scarlette and I sat across from each other, a thick slice of bread, a soft-boiled egg, and a mug of tea in front of us both.

I took a bite of bread. It tasted as good as I had hoped based on the smell. It was so good that I considered inviting Scarlette to stay. Then I looked at her, sliding a spoonful of egg into her mouth and knew I couldn’t. She was too bright. Too hopeful. Too beautiful.

Too much.

I’d become addicted. Then she’d leave.

I’d been fine with my solitude before she came to the cottage, I’d be fine once she left—if I didn’t let myself grow attached. She’d be nothing more than a distraction if I let her stay. A living, breathing, gorgeous distraction.

Still, my grandmother had tried to raise me to be somewhat less of a barbarian than I was naturally inclined to be. “The bread is delicious. Thank you for making it.”

She swallowed, and the look she gave me could have shamed the sun. “You’re welcome. I love baking. I wish I got the chance more often.”

I almost asked what she normally did. The words were on the tip of my tongue before I caught myself. I didn’t need to know. I didn’t want to know anything more about her. Taking another bite, I let the conversation fall.

Scarlette finished eating before me—probably because she limited herself to a single slice of bread. When she swallowed her last morsel, she rose from the table and began cleaning her dishes. I decided not to object and focused on finishing my third slice of bread. When I stood, I picked up the basket instead of my plate and carried it back to Scarlette.

“Thank you again for the bread. Also, for delivering these charms. I’ll see you in a week.”

She didn’t protest this time, taking the basket without meeting my gaze. I was careful not to allow so much as a fingertip brush her skin. Ward save me, I shouldn’t be having this hard of a time. I felt less of a pull toward women I had slept with than Scarlette.

I concentrated on the memory of watching my mother walk out of the cottage, the need to roam stronger than the need to watch her children grow into adults. She had stayed with us until we were five, but it had been a struggle for her. She had returned often at first, but over the years, her visits became shorter, with longer stretches in between.

The memories were enough to harden my resolve. Scarlette was a temporary nuisance, nothing more.

She stared at a button on my vest. “Thank you for everything. I’ll be careful and make sure the enchantments reach Wulfkin safely. I can never repay you enough for the charm you are making me, so I’ll say it once more. Thank you.”

She left the cottage, and I forced myself not to stand by the front window watching her go. I tried to convince myself that I had sent her away as much for her sake as my own. If she wanted a charm powerful enough to provide continual healing for years, then I needed to focus.

The quality of a charm depended on multiple factors. The materials needed to resonate with the power and the mage. For an active power, that meant glass or gemstones. The shape mattered, too. Rosalia had sent Scarlette with a glass cube because body-healing charms took to that shape best. Technically, I could make do with a sphere, but the further from the

ideal the charm was, the less powerful it would be, no matter how talented the mage crafting it.

The node made my family the strongest healers in the kingdom. When we were within node lands. The magical well of power, fed by multiple ley lines, sat in the middle of the cottage, but we could tap into it over a far greater distance. I walked through it multiple times a day, the magic doing nothing until I harnessed my will. If I traveled a little less than a dozen miles from the node, no amount of will allowed me to channel that energy. I was a healer only because my ancestor had locked this node, tying it to his power and bloodline.

Beyond node lands, I only had access to my innate magic, which wasn't healing at all, but its passive counterpart, body-reading. I had made the enchantment Rosalia used to diagnose Scarlette's mother. I renewed it for her every time she visited. Without the node, I could not heal. Here in the cottage, however, I was more powerful than any healer who could rely only on their own inborn mage-talent.

I had access to the magic needed for Scarlette's charm, but I couldn't create it with a wave of my hand. She needed it to last. Not months, but years. I planned for decades. That meant a sustained effort. Pinprick focus.

I grabbed the base for the charm and cupped the cube in my hands. I pulled the power from the node, the blood-lock shaping it into healing power. It was my concentration that funneled the magic into the vessel shaped to receive it. My energy reserves that were used up even while the node's power never diminished.

I could only do so much in one sitting. When I felt the first throbs of a headache forming, I put the charm aside. My exhaustion was mental, but it still took several moments to gather the energy to stand. Doing something physical would help me recover, I knew.

I stretched my hands over my head, curving my back and going up on tiptoe. Letting out a breath and lowering my arms, I glanced at the clock on the mantle. The dark wood was polished almost to a mirror shine, the gift from my mother a cherished possession of Grandmother's.

I knew my grandmother missed her daughter and granddaughter, but she accepted why they couldn't stay in Drakona Forest in a way I couldn't. Like Grandmother, both my mother and sister were healers by birth. The node magnified their power, but they didn't need it. Waiting in the cottage

for an emergency to befall a villager, making charms and enchantments, didn't suit their temperaments.

As soon as she came of age, Mother had left the forest to travel the world, healing those in need. She had returned when she was pregnant with me and Rosalia, but she wasn't able to settle down the way Grandmother had. Then, a few years ago, Rosalia had set off on her own, too.

I didn't understand their need to wander. Even if I could have healed people like they did outside of node lands, I wouldn't want to travel the kingdom. I appreciated my ability to help others without having to speak to them. I could make magical talismans and sell them to the outside world through Thalia in Wulfkin.

Thinking about the charms and enchantments had me thinking of Scarlette. She had left about two hours ago, which meant she'd probably be a little less than halfway to the village now. So long as nothing had happened to her on the way.

I knew the path to Wulfkin was relatively safe. The odds of anything happening to Scarlette were minimal. But she was in an unfamiliar forest and worried about her mother. She was probably upset because of me.

I was out the back door of the cottage before I could think the better of my plan. It wasn't even a plan so much as a need to make sure she was still safe. It only took a few minutes to walk to the banks of the river. I paused at the edge of the tree line and stripped, folding my clothes and placing them in a hollow I had created years ago for just that purpose. My clothes protected from the elements, I walked toward the river. I slipped the necklace holding two summons crystals and an unfinished charm over my head, letting it dangle from my wrist.

I shot a burst of node power into the charm, tying off the magic and activating it. I always carried an active charm with me if I might leave node lands. It was nothing like the one I was making for Scarlette, but it would last long enough if there was an emergency and a villager needed to be healed.

Once I was far enough from the trees, I called up the magic of the node. Power filled me. It should have been exhausting after the work I had done this morning, but this was different than making charms. I was no longer a conduit, but the vessel. I let the power saturate my bones and blood.

Then I shifted.

Scales covered my skin. My body grew, elongated. Wings spread from my shoulder blades and a tail extended from the base of my spine. In less than a heartbeat, I was done and let the power fade. The necklace fit snugly on my front ankle, where I could still see the crystals in case of a summons.

Once shifted, I didn't need magic to maintain my shape. I could even leave node lands. I couldn't shift back once I flew beyond the node's reach, but that had never bothered me. When I shifted, I wanted the freedom to fly far and wide. I knew I'd always be able to come home and return to human form when I was ready.

Perhaps this was why my mother and sister needed to leave Drakona Forest. They had to work harder to get that sense of freedom. Neither of them could use the power of the node to become a dragon instead.

I launched myself into the air, my wings barely fitting between the break in the tree line on each side of the river. If Scarlette had ventured away from the riverbank, I'd never spot her under the dense foliage. I wouldn't know if she was safe.

Freedom didn't mean much if it was built on uncertainties.

Three
Scarlette

I lasted about halfway to the village before giving in to the urge to glance under the cloth covering the charms in the basket. Mindful of Ranulf's warning, I was careful not to touch them, but I wanted to see what I was delivering, at least. What I found was a handful of marbles, the glass smooth with a greenish tint, and stacks of wooden discs.

Each disc had a symbol carved into its surface. I spotted a bone, a willow tree, and what looked like a drop of water. The symbols most likely denoted what each spell was made to do.

I wanted to look through them and examine each one. The wooden discs would be enchantments, magical items that could be triggered as needed, draining their power based on usage. They were exactly what Ranulf had warned me not to touch. If I triggered the enchantments accidentally, all the effort put into their creation would be wasted. Most likely, a glancing touch wouldn't invoke them. Ranulf would have made the trigger something like tracing the entire carving just to avoid such mistakes. But since I didn't know for certain, I erred on the side of caution.

The marbles would be charms. Simpler spells, but ones that ran through power no matter how much they were used. A charm never turned off, but it failed after a set amount of time. Most charms had to be renewed every few weeks.

I picked up a marble, careful not to touch any of the wooden discs. I admired the way the color of the glass shifted under the sunlight, reflecting all the shades of green in the forest. I imagined the same tiny bit of glass dwarfed by Ranulf's hands.

The healer was an odd mix of gentle and gruff. Shoving me out the door, but insisting I eat breakfast first. Drinking me in one moment—heat in his eyes—and glaring the next. I was no longer convinced that he wanted

nothing to do with me. But he clearly did not appreciate whatever feelings my presence inspired.

His moods should have left me dizzy and ready to leave him behind. Instead, I was curious. I wanted to know all the secrets locked behind closed lips. I wanted to taste those lips.

I shoved the marble back into the basket and shook my head. My emotions were running wild due to stress. I had been so worried for so long about my mother, and now, here I was, about to get the remedy she needed. No wonder I couldn't stop thinking about the healer. The hands that would hold the glass as he made the charm. The lips that would . . . no.

The charm. I needed to focus on the charm and what I would do if Ranulf didn't bring it in a week. No, thoughts like that weren't any better. But now I couldn't think of anything else.

Maybe what I needed was to stop thinking. Switching the basket from one arm to another, I looked up at the sky. I was walking along the bank of the river, following it downstream toward the village. The sun would be high enough soon that I'd want to retreat to the tree line and shade, but for now I enjoyed the summer heat. It was mild compared to what I was used to back home.

As I watched, a shadow crossed the sky ahead of me. It soared overhead, circling slowly around, and my breath caught. A dragon.

I knew the creatures lived in the Gaboor Mountains, which defined the eastern and northern edges of the forest, but I hadn't expected to see one flying overhead here. Then again, the Drakona Forest must have earned its name for a reason.

I stopped walking, stepping closer to the tree line to be safe, and watched the dragon. It was a majestic creature, with a long sinuous neck and wedge-shaped head. Its tail was half again as long as its body, but with only the clouds to compare to, I couldn't guess at how large it was. The dragon's scales glinted in the sun, a brilliant green that matched the leaves of the trees surrounding me. The same shade as Ranulf's eyes.

I shook my head, refusing to think about the surly healer's eyes, or arms, or any other part of him. But it was too late. My thoughts spiraled back to why he had insisted I leave. I prayed to Affenala, the goddess of hope, that it hadn't been a ploy to get rid of me without needing to make the charm.

I always tried to honor the Affenala's optimism, but it was hard in this case. If Ranulf didn't come to the village in a week, I'd have to try again, and time was running out.

The dragon stopped circling, flying back toward the mountains with lazy wingbeats that propelled it through the air at a breathtaking speed. I resisted the urge to turn and watch it fly away. I needed to reach Wulfkin and find a way to pay for a bed for the next week.

The innkeeper smiled when she saw me come through the door, basket on my arm. "Back so soon? I'm glad the healers were able to help you."

The inn in Wulfkin served mostly as the local tavern. Mistress Weslet rented out two bedrooms upstairs to the occasional traveler, but few visitors bothered to come so far into Drakona Forest. The healing charms and enchantments like the ones in my basket were sent downriver to larger towns and even the capital city. Few people needed to request specific charms like I had.

"Actually, these are for the village." I set the basket on the counter. "Ranulf asked me to bring them into the village for him. He said it will take a week for my charm to be ready."

Mistress Weslet made a disapproving sound. "I take it Grandmother Molle wasn't at the cottage. Leave it to that boy to make you walk all the way back on an errand that could have waited until his normal delivery day. He doesn't realize how long of a walk it is, probably thinks it is reasonable for you to walk to the village and back to the cottage on the same day. Well, I won't have it. You will spend the night here."

I bit my lip. "I'll need a bed for more than one night, I'm afraid. He made it clear that I'm to wait here and he'll deliver the charm when it is done. I can help around the inn while I'm here, of course. And a place in the stable is good enough for me."

The innkeeper had allowed me to help her serve food and drinks to pay for my bed the first time I came through the village. She had even insisted I take an empty guest room instead of sleeping in the hayloft, as I had

suggested. But what she offered out of kindness for one night might not be an option when I was staying for an entire week.

She frowned, and I tried not to let disappointment seep in. If I couldn't earn a room at the inn, then maybe one of the villagers would let me stay with them in exchange for help around the house for the week. I was certain there were plenty of people with too much to do and a bit of empty floor and a blanket, if nothing else.

Mistress Weslet didn't send me packing, though. At least not yet. "Here, you're probably hungry after your long walk. Why don't you sit and I'll bring you a bowl of stew. We can discuss everything after you've eaten."

"Oh, but I should really take care of these charms." I couldn't afford a bowl of stew unless the innkeeper allowed me to pay for it in labor.

She pulled the basket from the counter. "I'll deliver these to Thalia while you eat; it will be easier than trying to tell you where to find her. Now go. Sit. I'll send Alfred out with a bowl."

She ushered me to a table, silencing my half-hearted attempt at an objection with a single look. I sat down, and she went back through the door to the kitchen.

Within minutes, Master Weslet scurried out of the kitchen carrying a full bowl of stew, a mug of ale, a heel of bread, and a wedge of cheese. I watched in amazement as he set everything on the table in front of me without so much as a splash, despite both the mug and bowl being full to the brim. He nodded at me and hurried away without a word.

Though the bread was a tad dry and bland, the meal as a whole was delicious. And huge. I was barely halfway through by the time Mistress Weslet returned. She smiled when she saw me digging into the food, but before she could say anything, a man stumbled into the common room from the stairs.

"Ale," he called out before collapsing into a chair.

I wondered if he was a patient, someone who had put up with the discomforts of travel to reach the node and powerful healers. Then I saw the way the innkeeper frowned at him and revised my opinion. A common drunk, stumbling out of bed well after the sun had reached its zenith.

I watched him from the corner of my eye. He wore leather pants the same dark shade as his short hair with a simple linen shirt. No vest or

jacket. Then I noticed the hilt of a sword on his hip. An armed drunk. Wonderful.

I trained my eyes back on the last of my meal, not wanting to catch the man's attention. Every instinct I had told me to avoid him. I saw a flash of green skirts as Mistress Weslet delivered his ale and asked if he wanted anything to eat.

When I finished eating, I gathered the empty dishes and carried them to the kitchen. I found the sink easily after my evening helping out, and I had them cleaned in no time. Master Weslet even went so far as to thank me before I exited his domain and returned to the common room.

I went directly to the counter to talk to the innkeeper. Maybe I could offer to bake for the inn this week. Would she be insulted if I made the suggestion?

"You didn't have to do that," she said with a smile when I came out of the kitchen. "It is my job to clean up after the patrons."

"I told you before, I have no coin to offer."

"And the meal was a gift, dear."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome. You more than earned it the other night. I hadn't realized what a relief it is to have an extra set of hands around here in the evening."

"Then you could use the help this week while I wait for the charm? Not just the evening, of course. I won't have anything else to do, so I am free to help during the day as well."

"I'd love to have your help, and the bedroom you used before is still free, but I have a different offer for you. Actually, it is a bit of a favor."

"What is it?"

Mistress Weslet looked over at the man now shoveling stew into his mouth, then leaned closer to me over the counter. "The village needs to get a message to Ranulf. We have a summons crystal for medical emergencies, but this doesn't qualify. Sending someone with a note means a full day's work lost. Thalia and I thought that perhaps you could deliver it to the cottage for us tomorrow."

My smile froze. I imagined how Ranulf would react to opening his door and finding me there once again.

The innkeeper hurried to keep talking. She must have feared I'd say no. "I know it is quite a walk and you have already been traveling for days,

but this message is very important. I'll make sure he lets you stay at the cottage until your charm is finished, too. His grandmother would be ashamed to hear that he sent you away without a cure for your mother."

"He didn't refuse to make the charm," I defended him automatically. "He said he would deliver it to me here."

"Yes, but it would be easier if you were around when he finishes it, wouldn't it?"

Since I had the same thought, I couldn't object. As much as I worried about Ranulf's reaction to finding me once more asking to stay at the cottage, I couldn't deny that I wanted to be there. I wanted to see the charm getting made. I wanted to know that I'd soon have something to bring home to my mother.

I wanted to figure out the healer and see if I had imagined that heated look when he first came downstairs this morning.

"I can deliver the message. Should I leave now?" It was late enough that the forest would grow dark well before I reached the cottage. Despite the long summer days, it would grow dark early thanks to the heavy tree cover. But if the message was urgent . . .

Mistress Weslet looked over at the sole patron of her common room once more. "No. Tomorrow is soon enough. Thank you, dear."

People began drifting into the common room for an end-of-day drink or a meal soon after I agreed to return to the healers' cottage. Though Mistress Weslet had made it clear that she was happy to offer me a bed for the night in exchange for my services as a messenger, I felt silly sitting in the common room like a paying patron.

I pulled on the same apron I had used the other night and began helping. The villagers were a friendly bunch, chatting with me, joking, and having a good time. I could forget my worries here. It was a pleasant change from the tavern where I worked back home. Anger was more common than joviality there.

The man from earlier had returned to his room when the first surge of people entered the common room. Later in the evening, when most people

who only wanted meals had finished and returned home, and those who planned to stay for drinks pulled out dice, he returned. He wore the same leather pants but had added a quilted gambeson over his shirt. He still carried a sword, and I could now see that he had a long hunting knife at his other hip.

Plenty of villagers made their living from hunting and trapping in the forest, but there was something very different about this huntsman. He sat down at a table where a handful of men diced, and the locals exchanged glances before passing him the cup of dice.

"Going to try to get us all drunk again tonight, is he?" I heard one man murmur to his friend. "You'd think he'd have learned his lesson last night."

I wandered over to the dice game. "Are you ready for another round?"

Before the stranger could answer, one of the locals shook his head. "This is my last. Gotta get home soon."

The other villagers nodded their heads in agreement, and the huntsman scowled. When that dice game ended, he moved on to another table. Once more, the locals took that as a signal to finish their drinks and leave.

I wandered over to the counter where Mistress Weslet poured ale. She watched the men make their way out of the common room with a small smile. I had expected her to be upset at the loss of custom, but clearly something had happened the night before to make everyone wary of the stranger.

He didn't join the final game still going, shifting to a table by himself. He took a sip of ale and slammed his mug on the table. I pasted on my politest smile and went to check if he needed another drink.

"Can I get you anything else?"

"Just another ale." His eyes traveled up my body, but I didn't think he was actually seeing me. Habit, rather than active interest. When he finally made it to my face, his brow furrowed. His hand snapped out and grabbed my wrist. "You weren't here yesterday."

I had learned after years of working in the tavern back home that sometimes the best way to get free of unwanted attention was to ignore it. This huntsman seemed like the type who would make more of a fuss if I wrenched my arm free. If I didn't protest, he might release me on his own after I answered his question. And if he didn't, well, then breaking free was still an option.

"I wasn't."

He tugged my arm, but he wasn't trying to pull me closer. "Sit. Take a break with me for a few minutes. What's your name? I'm Gideon."

He released my wrist.

I didn't sit, his sudden change in demeanor somehow more worrying than his initial grasp on my arm. "I'm really quite busy."

Gideon reached into his belt pouch and pulled out a half silver. He set it on the table and slid it my direction. "Tell me about the dragon."

I blinked. I looked from the coin to Gideon and tried to make sense of his words. "The dragon?"

He pushed the coin a little closer to me. "The dragon. I know it is living in the forest. What I need to know are its habits. The location of its lair."

The bit of metal called to me. That single coin could help so much. But I knew nothing about a dragon apart from what I had seen that day. Even if I did, I wouldn't want to share information with the hunter. The thought of anyone killing such a majestic creature appalled me.

I looked away from the silver and shook my head. "I don't think any dragons are living in the forest. The trees would make it difficult for them. We're close enough to the mountains that they might fly overhead once in a while, I suppose."

The dragon-hunter snatched back his coin. "I know you are all lying to me, and I'm going to prove it."

I took a step back. "I'll go get you that ale."

Mistress Weslet had a mug waiting for me when I reached the counter, but she kept a grip on the handle. "Was he bothering you? I can have Alfred serve him the rest of the evening. You are supposed to be resting, anyway."

"Not necessary," I said with a genuine smile. Working for the Weslets made keeping my cheerful expression all night easy. "I don't need to rest. And Gideon wasn't bothering me that way. He wanted to know about a dragon in the forest."

The innkeeper slid the mug toward me, but slowly. "And what did you tell him?"

"That the forest seemed like an odd place for a dragon to make its home, but they might fly overhead since we are so close to the mountains."

She relaxed, her movements once more brisk and efficient. "A good answer. If he says anything more about dragons, let me know, will you?"

"Of course."

I brought the mug of ale to Gideon, then checked on the few remaining patrons. Most of them were heading home, the hunter's presence contributing to their short night out. A woman clapped the final man still seated on the shoulder as she stood up. Her voice was low, and I just made out the words. "You going to drink him under the table again tonight?"

The man smirked. "Gotta make sure Hilde earns something, since the blighter chased off all her regulars."

"As if she didn't tell everyone that she wouldn't serve more than two pints to anyone who can't hold their drink while he's here."

I finished clearing the table that had recently emptied and carried the dishes back to the kitchen. Did this still have to do with the dragon? Why would the entire village care about keeping a dragon secret? I tried to imagine what the secret could even be. That the dragon lived in the forest, I supposed, but that made little sense. As I had told Gideon, the trees did not make for an inviting home for a creature so large. Especially not one with wings.

I washed the dishes, trying to think of other possibilities, then pushed the question aside. I'd leave the village after breakfast tomorrow. Once I had the charm, I might stop by one more night, but then I had to go home. Wulfkin wasn't my home, and I had no right to its secrets.

Four
Ranulf

I could count on one hand the number of times anyone had knocked on the cottage door this year. Both Wulfkin and Ortfel had a summons crystal the villagers used if the charms I had made weren't sufficient and they needed a healer. Occasionally, someone came to visit Grandmother or Thalia sent one of her children with a request for more charms to sell downriver. Everyone who would visit knew Grandmother was in Ortfel. Unless Scarlette had failed to deliver the basket yesterday, Thalia could have no reason to send a message.

I had spent little time with Scarlette, but she didn't seem like the type of person who wouldn't deliver the basket. She was a rule-follower, by my estimation. Not to mention, she wouldn't risk angering the man crafting a charm to save her mother's life.

So, when there was a knock on the front door shortly after noon, I wasn't certain who to expect, but Scarlette wasn't on my list. I opened the door and stared. A heartbeat later, I remembered to scowl. "What are you doing back here?"

"I have a message." She held out a piece of paper sealed with a glob of green wax.

I took the message. Thalia. What could the merchant possibly need when Scarlette had delivered a full shipment half a week early?

I walked over to the table, not inviting Scarlette inside, but not closing the door in her face, either. The wax broke under my thumb and I unfolded the note.

I read it in silence, then crumpled the paper and tossed it into the fire. I looked across the table, but there was nobody there. Scarlette still stood outside, watching me through the open door.

“I know you wanted me to stay in the village, but Mistress Weslet was insistent that I bring you that message. I could go back again, but I’ve been thinking about it, and it really doesn’t make sense. You said delivering the basket could be the favor I did in exchange for the charm, but if you then have to bring it to me in Wulfkin anyway, it doesn’t save you a trip, does it? I promise I’ll stay out of your hair.”

I let the stream of words wash over me. I didn’t really have a choice. “Come in already.”

Scarlette entered the cottage and closed the door behind her. “I can stay?”

I sighed. Hilde’s message, scribbled at the bottom of the warning from Thalia about the dragon-hunter, had been meant to prick my conscience. But it hadn’t been necessary. I understood the danger of a hunter showing up in Wulfkin. They had sent Scarlette with the message because I couldn’t risk flying to the village with the charm. Not if the hunter was still around.

I didn’t much like the idea of her walking through the forest by herself with a hunter out there, either.

Her expression remained cautiously optimistic, though the caution increased and the optimism wavered the longer I stayed silent. Finally, I forced the words out. “You can stay.”

Joy suffused her in an instant. “Thank you!”

She was practically bouncing where she stood. I had the fleeting impression that if there hadn’t been a table between us, she would have thrown her arms around me. It was good that the table was there, then. I didn’t need to know what her body felt like pressed against mine. Such a memory would haunt me long after she left.

I knew, without thinking about it, that crossing that line with Scarlette couldn’t lead to anything casual. I only did temporary and casual. Permanent was a myth, and thus serious was out of the question.

“I have work to do,” I said abruptly. “You know where the guest room is.”

She stilled. “Can I . . . can I help with anything?”

I shook my head. “There’s soup over the fire. Help yourself. I’ll be back. Later.”

I fled out the back door, through the garden and into the trees. I wanted to go for a flight, but shouldn’t take the risk. The villagers would do their best with the huntsman—they were protective of their healers—but Thalia

didn’t think he would give up. He’d go hunting on foot soon, even if his efforts in the common room yielded no information.

I contented myself with checking the traps Grandmother had set. With Scarlette staying at the cottage, we’d want more meat. She looked like she could use a few hearty meals.

Five

Scarlette

I baked a loaf of bread, hoping that action might be enough to help Ranulf thaw towards my presence. At supper the night before, he had answered every question I asked with either a single word or a grunt. I had taken the hint and stopped asking. Still, it was better than the first evening, when he hadn't even remained at the table to eat.

His silences ate at me. I'd prefer he ranted, or even raged. I could deflect anger that was directed outward, but how was I to soften his mood if he always turned inward? Ignoring him wasn't an option. Clearly, it wasn't a challenge for him to ignore me, but the same was not true in reverse.

I was excruciatingly aware of Ranulf, even when he wasn't in the same room as me.

With the bread made, I set to work on the rest of breakfast. If my first morning in the cottage was any indication, Ranulf would come downstairs within a quarter hour. A quick trip into the garden and hen house supplied me with all I needed. I set a pan over the fire and began chopping zucchini and pepper.

I transferred the vegetable omelets to plates right as I heard the trapdoor to the attic open. The kettle whistled over the fire, and I went to grab it.

Without a word, Ranulf carried the food to the table while I filled the mugs.

I expected nothing more than a gruff "thanks" when I sat. After last night, I knew better than to expect more than a single word, though I wouldn't stop trying to thaw his attitude toward me.

He surprised me, therefore, with his effusive greeting. "Thank you for breakfast."

I grinned. Maybe by the end of my stay, I'd be able to get five words at a time from him. "You're welcome. The garden out back is lovely. Do you or Grandmother Molle tend it?"

"Mostly me. Grandmother will putter around every now and then, but she is much better at tending to people than plants."

"I take it you prefer the plants? Is it because they can't talk or because you can yank them out of the ground and throw them in the compost when they annoy you?"

Ranulf's smile was small, a slight quirk of the lips, a twinkle in his eyes, but it was there. He didn't force his mouth back into a straight line when he realized he had shown a hint of amusement, either. "Both."

His one-word answer didn't bother me this time. "Do you do a lot of foraging in the forest, too?"

"Yes, but that is mostly Grandmother. She usually forages and takes care of a few traps. I tend the garden and hunt when the traps aren't enough."

"And she bakes the bread."

"Yes, but hers isn't as good as yours. And I will deny it if you ever tell her I said that."

We shared a brief look, a moment of silent laughter. Then Ranulf's eyes shuttered. He stared at his plate, a line forming between his eyebrows.

I pretended I hadn't noticed his change in mood. "Who does the rest of the cooking?"

He shrugged.

Great, now we were down to silent answers. I sighed and focused on my meal. Apparently, I had pushed too far. I just didn't understand how. There hadn't been a slow increase in annoyance or a sudden reaction to one comment. He shut down after answering me of his own volition.

When we finished, I gathered the dishes without a word and washed up. Ranulf opened his mouth when I took his plate, then shook his head and moved to a chair without saying anything.

I could feel his eyes on me as I cleaned. I snuck a peek at him whenever I could, but I never caught him looking. Instead, he was always focused on something cupped in his palms. The furrow in his brow grew deeper every time I checked.

When the dishes were clean, I wiped down the table. The glass cube I had brought three days ago still sat in the center of the pale wood. I glanced

over at Ranulf and bit my tongue. Then I went back to the garden. I needed to get out before I demanded to know why he wasn't working on my charm. Doubtless, he had several other talismans to make.

I said a quick prayer to Affenala and willed myself to believe that he would have it ready by the end of the week. Since I was in the garden, I decided to pick a few vegetables and start a pot of soup for later. I figured interrupting the healer would annoy him more than making the food without asking him first. He hadn't seemed to mind my efforts for breakfast.

I tilted my face to the sky and enjoyed the warmth of the sun on my skin. I soaked it up like a flower, turning the light into peace, rather than a blossom. Then I surveyed the options in the garden and decided what I would pick. While I worked, I began to hum.

I wished Mama and I could manage more than a window box. Working in the sunshine, the dirt under my fingertips, appealed to me. I didn't have an apron or basket to load my selections in, so I pulled off my kerchief and made a bundle of vegetables with it.

Still humming, I carried my harvest into the kitchen and pumped water at the sink to clean off the dirt.

"What are you doing?"

A carrot dropped from my hands into the sink with a splash. I spun around to find Ranulf standing at the edge of the table. "I thought I'd make soup. I thought you wouldn't mind."

He took a step back, looking as surprised as I was at how close he had come. "You don't have to earn your keep here. You can rest."

It sounded like a plea.

"I enjoy being helpful, but if you don't want me to make the soup—"

"That's not the issue." He shoved his hand into his pocket, putting away the charm he had been working on. "Make the soup. Fine. I'm going to go out."

Worry swelled as he made his way to the front door. "What about the charm for my mother? If I'm in the way, I'll leave."

"I can use the node outside the cottage." He opened the door. "In fact, I'll get more done outside. It will be easier to focus."

He left.

I stared at the glass cube sitting untouched on the table and prayed that Grandmother Molle returned to the cottage soon.

I HAD ALREADY eaten by the time Ranulf returned. Hoping that maybe he'd work on my charm that afternoon if I didn't bother him, I retreated to the guest room. I knew that if I stayed near him, I'd give in to the urge to talk and ask him questions.

I tried to do as he had said earlier and rest, but idleness was not in my nature. I tidied, instead. The guest room doubled as a makeshift apothecary, as far as I could tell, and while everything was clearly labeled, it wasn't organized.

I looked over everything carefully before moving the first jar. I didn't want to ruin a system I didn't understand, but I felt confident in my assessment that there wasn't a system. Jars of the same ingredients dotted the shelves in multiple locations. A newer batch of one tincture had clearly been opened before the last batch had been finished. I couldn't understand how the same person who had labeled everything so meticulously could stand to shove everything on the shelves with no rhyme or reason.

Perhaps it was due to the influence of two different people.

If I was going to organize, I might as well clean, too. I pulled the jars and bottles off the shelves and wiped everything down as best I could with the supplies I had in the room. I kept my movements as quiet as possible, not daring to let Ranulf hear even so much as the clink of glass on wood.

I had just finished, and was wondering if I should mention the supplies I had discovered that were labeled as past their use-by date or the ones that were so low another batch should probably be started, when Ranulf knocked on my door.

"Do you want supper?"

I smoothed my skirts and opened the door. "Yes, thank you."

"Don't thank me. You're the one who made it. I just added a bit of rabbit to the soup." He glanced past me and spotted the wall of jars and bottles. I braced myself for a rebuke. "You did all that today?"

"I sorted alphabetically, but if there is a better system, I can do that."

"Alphabetically is fine. I can't believe you organized it all. I gave up years ago. Grandmother makes a mess of it faster than I can straighten. Seeing it like this might finally convince her that keeping everything

organized is worth the effort." Ranulf stepped past me into the room and went directly to one of the jars that was nearly empty. "Feverfew powder. I thought we had another jar of this. I'll add it to the list of things to replace."

"There are a few others you might want to add." I pointed at a bottle that was still three-quarters full. "That one said to use by midsummer of last year, for example."

Ranulf looked at me for a long moment. "Maybe I'll give you the list and you can update what we need. That way, I can focus my efforts on your charm."

"I can do that."

We filed out of the room and sat in our usual seats at the table. For a few minutes, we ate soup and bread in silence, but it was a different silence than I had experienced with him previously. It was comfortable. Companionable, even. I decided not to break our seeming truce, though the urge to speak was strong.

"I'm sorry about this morning," Ranulf said into his half empty bowl. "I shouldn't have snapped at you."

I wasn't sure how to respond. My first instinct was to apologize for bothering him, but I didn't owe him an apology for existing. I didn't apologize, but I was honest. "I don't want to be a distraction."

"You aren't . . ."

I raised an eyebrow as he trailed off. At least he had tried to reassure me, even if he couldn't finish the sentence.

He laughed when he saw my expression, and I knew he wasn't laughing at me, but himself. I let the sound fill me, transfixed by how it changed his entire demeanor. This wasn't the grump who had thrown me out of the cottage or the healer who had stormed out this morning.

I had found him attractive before, but now? Now, he was devastating. Even if he hid behind a surly attitude again, I wouldn't forget the sound of his laughter or the shape of his smile. For a moment, I thought about how fun it would be to spend my life coaxing that laugh out.

Then I remembered my mother. I was here for a few days more. Then I'd take my charm and return to my life, and Ranulf would celebrate the return of his solitude.

"All right, you are a distraction, but it isn't your fault," he continued. "I'm the one who can't concentrate when there is a beautiful woman in the same room as me."

I felt my cheeks heat and was shocked by my reaction. Men had complimented my body for years. At the tavern, they often accompanied their crude words with unwelcome touches, and my only reaction was a tight smile while I stepped out of reach. I didn't blush at anything they said.

Being called beautiful by Ranulf felt different. He used the word so matter-of-factly that I felt almost innocent hearing it. For him, it was a truth, not something to exploit.

"I'll stay in the guest room if that helps. I can . . ." I trailed off. What could I do in the guest room now that the healing supplies were sorted? Writing up the list of what was running low or no longer potent wouldn't take much time.

"Considering that you accomplished a task that would have taken me days in a single afternoon, I suspect you'd be bored in there. I'm not sure what you'll do elsewhere, either. You aren't a maid here; you don't have to clean everything." He lifted his spoon. "Or cook, though I won't object. Especially not to the bread."

"I will gladly cook while I am here. Just let me know if I'm ruining your concentration."

"I'll manage."

We fell silent again. I didn't know what Ranulf was thinking, but dozens of questions about the node and charms and magic swirled through my head. I knew only the most basic facts about magic and wanted to ask everything. I opened my mouth, then realized that bombarding Ranulf with my questions was a surefire way to ruin the slice of harmony we had found.

I took a bite of bread instead of talking. When I finished chewing, another question nearly popped out before I caught myself. I shoved a spoonful of soup into my mouth.

Across from me, Ranulf's shoulders shook. "Is it really that hard for you to not talk?"

I pressed my lips together and nodded.

"Go ahead. Say whatever it is."

"You make charms and enchantments to sell in Wulfkin, right?"

"Yes."

"And the enchantments are limited in what they can do?"

"Yes."

"Why make both?"

"They serve different purposes."

I studied my mostly eaten meal. Ranulf had invited me to speak, but he wasn't one to satisfy my curiosity. My questions probably sounded pointless to him.

I heard the clack of his spoon as he set it on the table. I peeked through my eyelashes and found Ranulf studying me.

"Most mages with active powers don't make charms." He rested his elbows on the table and laced his fingers together. "If a weather-changer made a charm, for example, it would cause a disaster. A charm, by definition, is a constant stream of mage-power. So, a weather-changing charm would bring on torrential rain, a never-ending windstorm, or drought. It does too much."

"But an enchantment only calls on the power when activated." I said.

"Exactly. It would take numerous enchantments to do what one charm can do, but they are controllable. Healing is somewhat unique among active powers. A charm will seek to heal the body touching it. If there isn't bleeding to stop, then the power will knit a broken bone together without consequences. But it isn't efficient. When a healer actively uses their magic, they direct the flow, targeting the injury. A charm can't do that. It takes a much stronger charm, therefore, to accomplish the same feat."

"Then why make a charm for my mother? Rosalia insisted I bring the glass cube to make the charm more powerful, but wouldn't an enchantment be better?"

"Rosalia was right that you want the charm to be as powerful as possible. Cubes resonate with healing magic, making them better than the basic sphere. A gemstone is even better than glass, though. The reason to use a charm instead of an enchantment in your mother's case is the consumption of power. I could make an enchantment that targets the tumor in her brain, and it would use less power to keep the growth in check than a charm. But an enchantment can only store so much power."

I leaned forward. "What does that mean?"

The school in my village barely taught the basics of mage-powers. I knew more about the gods and goddesses associated with each power than how they were used. The practical applications were far more fascinating than the theological associations. I wanted to understand. For a moment, I even forgot that we were discussing the magic necessary to keep my mother healthy.

Ranulf cleared his throat and shifted his gaze over my shoulder. “Used non-stop, an enchantment will run out in no time. A charm stores power differently. The amount used to make it determines how long the charm will last, but once it is made, it uses that full amount of power the entire time. It doesn’t matter if the charm only treats a single bruise or heals dozens of broken bones. It has power for a certain length of time.”

“How long will a charm last?” I remembered that we weren’t discussing theory, but my mother’s life. Rosalia had said her charm would last a month. How much longer would a charm made with the power of a node last? And what would I do when it inevitably failed?

“Depends. Most mages can make charms that last a few weeks, maybe up to two months. The ones you brought to Wulfkin for me will each last about three months. The one I’m making for your mother should last years. I’ll have a better sense of exactly how long when I finish.”

Years. So long, and yet, not long enough. My mother wasn’t even fifty. A few years from now, how would we afford a replacement? I couldn’t keep returning to this cottage expecting charity.

I fell quiet again. My curiosity quashed under a wave of worry. Ranulf opened his mouth at one point, but then closed it again without breaking the silence. He finished his meal and carried his dishes to the sink.

He pumped water into the sink. “Too bad we don’t have anything for dessert. I should have picked some berries while I was out today.”

I brought my own dishes to the sink and tried to nudge him to the side, but he didn’t move. If he wouldn’t let me clean, then I’d have to focus on what he would let me do. “Berries? I can go foraging tomorrow. I could make a fruit pie.”

His lips barely moved, but the light in his eyes was as good as a grin. “I know a terrific blackberry patch. I’ll show you tomorrow.”

Six

Ranulf

"Do you want me to show you the blackberry patch now?" I asked Scarlette as we finished breakfast.

Last night, I had discovered that I didn't like her silences. They weren't natural. Scarlette was meant to smile and talk and, most of all, ask questions. If I answered with single words, she stopped asking, folding in on herself. So, I answered. I answered fully, not wanting to dim her radiance.

I discovered that talking to Scarlette didn't require me to pretend. So long as I talked to her, she didn't care if I grumbled. She didn't accuse me of being unfeeling or ask if I knew how to smile. Perhaps because with Scarlette I didn't need to smile. I laughed.

It was dangerous, my shields cracking from the inside, but I'd repair those cracks. I knew what was coming and could protect myself. I'd be prepared.

"That would be perfect. I think I saw a basket in the guest room that is the right size. Let me grab it."

I waited for her by the back door and led her out through the garden. The basket swung wildly from her arm with every step as she practically skipped at my side.

"You are going to leave a trail of blackberries on the forest floor and discover an empty basket when you return to the cottage if you keep that up."

Scarlette laughed. "I'll be more careful once the basket is full, but right now I'm too happy to care. The forest is so beautiful. I'll miss it when I return home."

An inevitability. A reminder that these moments with Scarlette were just that: moments, nothing more. Did she understand that, too?

“I never understood how my mother and sister could stand to leave,” I told her. In case that wasn’t warning enough, I added, “I love living out here.”

Scarlette’s smile grew impish. “I’m sure your desire to stay here has nothing to do with a dislike of dealing with strangers constantly, either.”

“True. But I still think I’d rather live in one of the forest villages than an isolated home away from the forest.”

She laughed. “You’d hate where I live. No trees, a few hundred nosy neighbors, and we are close enough to the capital that there are always travelers passing through. Solitude and nature are foreign concepts there.”

“How can nature be a foreign concept? Surely you have farms?”

Scarlette shrugged. “A farm is nothing like this. It’s not even a big garden. At least not the farms near Graenod. The farmland is just acre upon acre of wheat, barley, and corn.”

We arrived at the blackberry patch, and I plucked a plump berry from a bush. Sweet juice, with just the right amount of tartness, burst upon my tongue. “Why stay?”

I spoke casually, but my need to hear her answer was anything but casual. How strong were her ties to her home? I couldn’t lie to myself that I didn’t know why I cared, but at the same time, her answer didn’t matter. If she was devoted to her village, then she’d never consider living anywhere else. If she wasn’t, then what guarantee was there that she wouldn’t leave her next home, too?

There was no answer that would make me happy, so why had I even asked the question?

Scarlette paused with a berry halfway to her mouth. “Where else would I go? Mother and I have a home and jobs. The city would be even worse, and other villages wouldn’t have a need for us. We aren’t skilled at any particular craft. Mother mends and washes, and I serve drinks in a tavern.”

I frowned. That was what Scarlette spent her days doing back home? What a waste. “You are a skilled baker. Exceptionally organized and industrious. You should be able to make a home for yourself anywhere.”

“Thank you.” She dropped the berry into her basket and began picking more. “Things aren’t that easy, however. Opening a bakery would require finding a place where people would pay for bread and don’t already have access to it, then enough money to buy the building and ovens and

everything else. I could probably find a job in another tavern, but any tavern that needed extra help would probably be no better than where I already work, and I'd have to find a new place to live. I'd lose money I don't have trying to transition."

For the first time, I wondered what her journey to Drakona Forest had cost Scarlette. I knew that only the truly desperate came all the way to the cottage, but I had forgotten somehow. Scarlette was just so happy; it was hard to remember that she couldn't even afford a basic healing charm, that she had come to beg for charity on the advice of my sister. The journey would have cost her. Not only for food and a bed every night, but it meant days away from her job in that tavern.

Every day she remained in the forest cost her, even now that I was letting her stay in the cottage.

Ward shield me, sending her back to Wulfkin after she first showed up at my door had been cruel.

I shoved my hands in my pockets. "I should head back and work on your charm. Will you be able to find your way back to the cottage?"

She glanced over at me, surprised by my abrupt change of topic. "I can follow the path back. Thank you for showing me the way."

I nodded, then pivoted and made my way back to the cottage. I thought I had seen a hint of disappointment mixed in with the surprise, but I had to be imagining it. Scarlette wouldn't be disappointed that I was going back. She was desperate for the charm to save her mother. It was the only reason she was here.

She must be relieved that I wasn't wasting any more time.

Scarlette stayed away until noon. Filling her basket wouldn't have taken that long, so she must have decided that her presence in the cottage would do more harm than good. I wouldn't tell her that her absence had been nearly as distracting as her presence the morning before. I didn't want her to worry about the charm.

She didn't need to worry. I wasn't about to let anything stop me from making the most powerful healing charm I could, not even myself. I was

mentally and magically exhausted by the time Scarlette returned, having channeled the node's power in greater quantities than I had ever before dared. When I was done, this charm would have enough magic to keep the growth of her mother's tumor in check for decades.

Scarlette entered the cottage from the garden door and set her basket on the kitchen counter. I rose, slipping the charm into the drawer of the small table by the chair, and stretched. My stomach growled loud enough to be heard across the cottage.

Scarlette smiled at me, then glanced at the fireplace and the expression slid right off her face. "Oh, no. I forgot to put the soup on before I left to pick berries."

"It's fine."

She didn't hear me. "I'll get something started. I'm so sorry. You must be hungry and it won't be ready—"

"Scarlette." When I said her name, she froze. "It's fine. We have half a loaf of bread and hard-boiled eggs and cheese in the chill box. You don't need to make soup."

She was practically quivering, the need to be helpful a physical force pushing at her.

Giving her something to do would work better than insisting she didn't need to do anything. "Why don't you pick some lettuce and a few vegetables? We can throw together a salad."

She leapt out the door and into the garden. I sighed and gathered the rest of the food. Then I mixed together a bit of oil and vinegar in a large bowl. When Scarlette returned with her skirt full of vegetables, I almost laughed. "How much salad do you think we can eat?"

She glared at me, and I did laugh.

"Most of this is for supper. I want to get it over the fire as soon as possible."

I took the lettuce from her, rinsed it and shredded it over the bowl. "After we eat. Let's focus on one meal at a time."

She chopped a carrot and a few radishes and tossed them on top of the lettuce. I mixed everything together and brought it to the table. Scarlette gave the remaining vegetables one last lingering look, then joined me.

"I'm going to check Grandmother's traps this afternoon," I told Scarlette as we ate. "I need a break from magic before I work more on your

charm. It's coming along well. Are there any wild ingredients I should look for while I'm out?"

"Mushrooms would be nice."

"I think I can manage that."

A loud banging on the door made us both jump. It wasn't a knock, but a demand. Instinctively, I glanced at the summons stones hanging from a leather thong around my neck. Neither glowed. Whatever the emergency, the villagers didn't need healing, or one of the stones would have glowed, telling me which village needed help.

Scarlette was on her way to the door. I raced ahead of her and grabbed the doorknob. I swung the door open. "What?"

The open door revealed a man who didn't bother to hide his impatience, as though I was the one inconveniencing him. Perhaps a few years older than me, he wore his brown hair tied back at the nape of his neck, his face clean-shaven, and his sense of superiority in the jut of his chin.

It was too much to expect a second surprise visitor to be anything like Scarlette. At least I wouldn't feel guilty sending this one on his way. I noticed the chain mail hauberk, sword, hunting knife, and crossbow he wore and revised my opinion. The dragon-hunter. Not only would I not feel guilty, I'd take great pleasure being as rude to him as possible.

"I heard there is a guest room available at this cottage. I need to rent it for the next few nights."

"You heard wrong." I swung the door closed, but he put out his arm, stopping it halfway.

"I can pay well."

"Good for you. I'm sure the innkeeper at Wulfkin appreciates your coin. Now leave."

At my side, blocked from the hunter's view by the door, Scarlette frowned. Ward shield me, I knew exactly what she was thinking. She thought I was refusing a paying guest because she was using the room. I glared at her, willing her not to step into view and offer her bed to the huntsman. It didn't matter that there were still empty beds in the cottage. I didn't want the hunter here.

The hunter pushed against the door, but I held it steady, not letting it swing so much as an inch wider.

"Let me talk to the old woman. I'm sure I can make her see reason."

“Are you threatening my grandmother?” I wished I was in dragon form for a moment, wanting to tower over this bastard and let out a belch of smoke in his face. I couldn’t breathe fire, like the true dragons, but I did exhale smoke when agitated in dragon form.

Maybe avoiding the man was the wrong strategy. Ward only knew how long he’d remain in the forest, hunting. If I let him see me, on the other hand, perhaps I could get rid of him for good.

“I’m trying to make her a wealthy woman, since you don’t seem to understand the value of coin.”

“Ranulf,” Scarlette whispered, placing her hand on my forearm.

If the hunter was at the cottage, I’d be able to avoid him more easily than if I had no idea where he was. And maybe I could lead him away and convince him the dragon he had heard about flew over the Drakona Forest but made its home in the mountains.

Plus, I liked the idea of taking this man’s money. Since Scarlette would no doubt insist on giving up her bed, it only seemed fitting that she get paid for the inconvenience.

I stopped holding the door, sweeping Scarlette back with my arm so she wasn’t hit when it slammed into the wall under the force of the hunter’s continued pressure. The man nearly fell on his face, but he recovered quickly. Then he spotted Scarlette and the look he gave her had me wanting to shove him out once more.

“Let me gather my things. It will only take me a moment to clear out of the guest room,” she announced.

I was fairly certain she only had a single change of clothes, so I wouldn’t have long alone with the hunter. I stepped between him and Scarlette’s retreating figure. “A half silver per night.”

“Outrageous. The finest inn wouldn’t charge so much.”

“I thought you wanted to make my grandmother wealthy.”

“A silver for the week.”

“A silver for four days.”

“Fine.” The huntsman dug into his belt pouch.

“Oh, and don’t even think about touching Scarlette. In fact, don’t even look at her. Understood?”

“If she opts to enjoy my bed instead of yours, that’s her business.”

I snorted. “Like you’d offer her any enjoyment.”

I heard Scarlette’s quick footsteps and turned around.

She looked past me at the huntsman, and while there was a smile on her face, I could tell it was forced. “The room’s all yours,” she told him.

He shoved a coin at me, grabbed his pack and went down the hall. The door slammed closed behind him.

Scarlette bit her lip. “Do you think your grandmother would mind if I borrowed her bed while she is gone?”

“Of course she wouldn’t, but you aren’t sleeping in her room.” I hurried to explain before she leaped to the wrong conclusion. “You can take the attic. I’m not leaving you down here by yourself with the hunter. I’ll sleep in Grandmother’s room.”

Scarlette glanced in the direction of the closed door. Biting her lip, she glanced back at me. “I met Gideon in Wulfkin. I don’t think he’s a danger to me. He’s too obsessed with the dragon he thinks lives in the forest. He only cares about me insofar as I can give him information. Which I can’t.”

“Nevertheless, I’d prefer for you to sleep in the attic.” I didn’t mention what the huntsman had said while Scarlette gathered her things. She was probably right that the man only saw her as a tool, but he wasn’t aware that Scarlette knew nothing about the dragon. I wouldn’t put it past him to try to get information out of her by any means available. I’d simply make sure he didn’t have the chance.

The morning after the hunter—Gideon—arrived at the cottage, I was in a foul mood. I hadn’t gotten enough sleep, I knew I couldn’t work on the charm for Scarlette today because I had to lead the hunter toward the mountains, and worst of all, the blackberry pie was gone. When I had retired to Grandmother’s room the night before, there was still a third of the pie remaining. I had heard Gideon get up in the middle of the night, but since he hadn’t gone near the attic stairs, I had let him be. Apparently, he had snuck out to eat the rest of the pie.

Scarlette gave me a nervous look as she kneaded the bread dough. The early hour had not improved my mood. She worked silently, warily. That only made things worse.

“I’m not going to bite your head off if you talk,” I snapped.

She pressed her lips together, and I wanted to curse. Great. Now I was taking my frustration out on her. We had finally reached a balance, and Gideon had thrown me right back into being a surly bastard. Scarlette didn't deserve my anger.

I looked closer, wondering if an apology would be enough to fix this, and realized she was holding back laughter. I lowered my head onto my arms on the table. "Go ahead, get it out."

She didn't laugh, but her voice rang with merriment. "Not a morning person, I take it?"

"I am neither a fan of mornings nor people."

Her laughter filled the room. "There were plenty of blackberries in that patch. I can make another pie."

I glanced at her, keeping my head down. She laid a towel over the bread dough and washed her hands. Her hair swayed back and forth as she moved, the locks only contained by her usual kerchief. I focused on her hair, trying not to notice the motion of her hips. Scarlette didn't stand still. She always seemed to be on the verge of dancing, even when standing in place.

"He'll just eat this pie, too," I grumbled.

"I'll hide it. He'll never even know it exists."

"I won't say no to more pie, but you really don't have to, Scarlette. And if you go blackberry picking, be careful. I don't want you to run into the hunter in the forest."

She brought a mug of steaming tea to the table and set it by my elbow. She paused at my side, and I lifted my head. Scarlette stared at the mug. "You could join me."

I shook my head, disappointment filling me. "I can't. I have to go check the traps before the hunter scares off all the game. I'll be gone most of the day."

My excuse made little sense, but Scarlette didn't question it. "I'll wait until Gideon is well on his way for the day before going out, then."

I handed her a stick about the width of my thumb and twice as long. I had enchanted it before going to sleep the night before. "Here. I want you to keep this close while the hunter is here—and bring it with you if you go into the forest."

"You want me to have a stick?" She took it from me and looked it over.

“It’s enchanted. If you pinch the bit near the end where it is flattened on both sides, anyone touching the other end will experience a shock of pain and be momentarily paralyzed.” I hated seeing Scarlette look so sad, so I quickly added, “I’ll work on the charm tonight. I know you need to return home soon.”

Her expression turned even more morose, and I cursed myself for reminding her. This was why I rarely tried to be kind. I just messed it up. I’d rather be a bastard on purpose than by accident.

I drained my mug of tea and stood. “I should go.”

“But you haven’t had breakfast yet.”

“I’ll eat on my way.” I grabbed a hard-boiled egg from the chill box. I couldn’t afford to wait for the bread to bake, anyway. Getting far enough away that I could shift into dragon form without any chance of the huntsman seeing my transformation would take time. But if I wanted him gone for good, I needed to lure him toward the mountains. I paused at the garden door. “Keep that enchantment with you, Scarlette. Gideon ought to spend the day in the forest hunting, but be careful when he is around. I don’t trust him.”

“I still don’t think he has any interest in me.”

I stared at her.

She smiled softly and slipped the stick into her pocket. “I’ll be careful, I promise.”

It would have to do. I couldn’t stay and watch over Scarlette if I wanted to convince the hunter he was wrong about a dragon in the forest. Hopefully, the man would be so impatient to catch his dragon that he’d leave the cottage shortly after waking and Scarlette wouldn’t have to deal with him at all.

Seven

Scarlette

I watched Ranulf leave and wondered what was going through his mind. He had stopped treating me as an interloper. Even when he snapped at me this morning, I knew I wasn't the target of his anger. Somehow, we had jumped right past neutrality, too. The way Ranulf had insisted that I sleep in the attic room, his worry over leaving me alone with Gideon, it had me imagining futures I shouldn't.

I might have become something other than an annoyance in his eyes, but it wouldn't last. Once Gideon moved on, and Ranulf no longer felt responsible for protecting me, he'd go back to his previous moods. Just because I came out ahead of the egotistical hunter didn't mean I'd still look good in comparison to solitude.

Ranulf didn't pretend otherwise. Even with everything else going on, he planned to work on my mother's charm so that I could leave as soon as possible. I was grateful. I was. I just wished it didn't feel like a dismissal.

Gideon exited the guest room armed, but without his chain mail, shortly after the bread finished baking. He looked around the room, saw we were alone, and smirked.

That smirk had me wondering if Ranulf's worries had merit. Perhaps I had misjudged the huntsman. Then his expression turned sly, and I knew his interest in me wasn't physical at all.

He approached the table. "There's still a half-silver in it for you if you tell me what you know about the dragon. That bitch back in Wulfkin will never know."

I shook my head. "I'm a visitor to the forest, here for a healing charm. You know more than I."

"Then get the information from the healer. He knows something." Gideon leered at me. "I'm sure you could convince him to spill his secrets. I

don’t care how you get the information, so long as you share it with me.”

Perhaps Ranulf wasn’t entirely wrong about the hunter. I doubted he’d expected Gideon’s interest to take this turn, however. I shook my head once more. “I’m not sleeping with him.”

The hunter considered me for a moment, then rolled his eyes. “Fine, I’ll throw in another half-silver.”

“I’m not going to sleep with him because you pay me a half-silver!”

He looked me up and down. “You aren’t worth more than that.”

Affenala save me. The urge to slap the man left me trembling, but I knew better. I might have judged myself safe, but not if I provoked him. Alone, I had no hope of protecting myself if he decided on violence in retaliation. I slipped a hand into my pocket, but the protective enchantment Ranulf had given me was an unknown. What if the shock only enraged him? How long would it last?

I should have asked Ranulf more questions about it, but I had been so sure that Gideon had no interest in me that I hadn’t felt the need. And I was right. I should be thankful he was more interested in making me sleep with Ranulf in order to unearth secrets than getting under my skirts himself.

Anger swirled inside me, an emotion I tried so hard to avoid. But even Affenala herself couldn’t make this rage disappear. I shouldn’t have to be thankful for any such thing.

“The answer is no,” I said as calmly as I could. I walked the long way around the table, keeping as much distance from the huntsman as I could, and made my way to the stairs. I’d stay in the attic until Gideon left to hunt dragons.

I left the trapdoor open, wanting to hear the hunter’s movements downstairs. It sounded like he had already forgotten me and was making himself at home in the kitchen. Releasing the stick hidden in my pocket, I flexed my fingers. I had wrapped my hand around it so tightly as I walked away from Gideon that the uneven nubs along its length had left impressions in my flesh. I was lucky that I hadn’t squeezed the bit designed to activate the enchantment.

I looked around the attic room, needing something to do while I waited for Gideon to leave. The attic stretched across the entire length of the cottage, but only a strip down the center was usable for more than storing old trunks, thanks to the sloped roof. There were two beds, one of which was covered in wood shavings, carving tools, and an eclectic assortment of

books. Most of the books were splayed open, with scraps of wood holding the pages flat. When I had peeked at them the night before, I had discovered an adventure novel, a book about animal anatomy, and a history of the ruling dynasties of Nemya. I wanted to close the books and add them to the low shelf against the wall. I'd slip bookmarks in first, but I knew better than to touch them.

I knew better than to touch any of Ranulf's things. Organizing the healing supplies in the guest room was one thing, but this was his personal space. I was shocked he had even let me into the room, let alone allowing me to stay unsupervised.

Since I couldn't tidy, and I had no other tasks to occupy me, I paced the length of the attic, pausing by the trap door every third pass or so to listen for Gideon. Eventually, I heard him return to the guest room. I stayed at the trapdoor and listened as he donned his chain mail and left the cottage.

I waited a few more minutes, then left the attic.

Given that Gideon hadn't even attempted to follow me to the attic, I figured he considered me beneath his notice. He would gladly use me to get the information he wanted, but he didn't have any interest in me beyond that. Avoiding him now had more to do with maintaining my composure than anything else.

I ate breakfast, boiled a few eggs, and started a large pot of soup. The time those tasks had taken ought to have been enough for Gideon to make his way far from the cottage and the blackberry patch. I found the basket I had used the day before and left.

I took my time picking berries, choosing only the best ones, and snacking on several as I went. It was a lovely way to spend the morning. Still, even under the shelter of the trees, where the sun's heat was pleasant rather than oppressive, I felt hot and sticky by the time the basket was full.

I could hear the river in the distance, a rush of water that would feel divine. Without thinking about it, I turned toward the river instead of the cottage. It only took a few minutes to reach the bank. I followed it downstream, looking for an area where the water calmed. I knew from my travels to and from Wulfkin that the river widened and slowed at random spots as the terrain of the forest changed.

It took me nearly a half hour to find an ideal spot for swimming. I was even more impatient to dive into the cool water after my hike. I found a flat spot to place my basket of blackberries and pulled my kerchief off and

tossed it atop the basket. My hair was going to become a wet, tangled mess and I didn't care.

Walking closer to the riverbank, I began loosening the laces of my bodice.

Some instinct made me look up into the bright sky. The sun was almost directly overhead, its light sparkling on the surface of the water. A few clouds dotted the sky. Beneath them soared the dragon. It curved back and forth, not quite following the path of the river far below it. Its scales glittered like emeralds and my breath caught as I took in its beauty. It was flying lower than the first time I had seen it, and I could make out more details, like the black eyes that seemed to lock on me.

The dragon dove lower, skimming over the trees on the far side of the river, getting closer and closer. I held my breath. Awe held me immobile. I should have been afraid, but I couldn't summon any emotion but wonder.

Then the dragon banked left and came directly toward me. I stumbled back a step and fell on my bottom. The dragon's wings flapped, the wind sending dirt in my face and my hair and skirts into disarray, and it flew straight up toward the sun.

I sat in the grass for a few minutes, trying to figure out what had happened. If the dragon had opened its mouth, it could have swallowed me whole or turned me to ash with a single burst of flame. But the way those dark eyes had locked on me hadn't been predatory.

That hadn't been the gaze of a ravaging beast. There had been an intelligence I hadn't expected in their depths. Instinct told me I had never been in any real danger, and I wanted to believe it too much let logic take over.

Why would anyone want to kill such a magnificent creature?

I swiped at the hair in my face and looked at the dirt now covering my hand. I could contemplate what had happened with the dragon once I was in the water.

Eight
Ranulf

I walked much farther from the cottage than usual, making my way to a clearing a few miles away instead of the banks of the river. I didn't know when Gideon would wake up and start his hunt, and I didn't want to take any risk of him seeing me transform.

The legends from before the Node Wars were filled with tales of impossible magics. Time and embellishment warped fact into fiction, but not everything was a tall tale. Still, some legends needed to remain nothing more than stories told around a fire.

A healer's magic was based on knitting together bones and flesh, changing a body until it became whole. With enough power, the possible changes were almost limitless. Shifting into animal forms used to be the predominant use of the mage-power. But without a node to draw on, most body-changers couldn't manage the shift, or if they did, it left them so exhausted it was a pointless endeavor. Those who could manage the feat did not advertise the fact. Maintaining my secret was as much about protecting healers as a whole as protecting myself.

I stripped and slipped the necklace with my summons crystals and emergency charm off over my head, letting it dangle from my wrist. I pulled on the magic and let the transformation take over. I shouldn't have been able to transform into a dragon. Not because I didn't have the power—though the change in size affected the amount of power needed to shift, the node was more than sufficient for the task—but because I didn't know how a dragon's body was put together.

Healing power required guidance. If my grandmother attempted to shift into a dragon, she could kill herself. She didn't know how the internal organs of such a foreign creature worked. I had managed the transformation through childish ignorance. I didn't know how much I didn't know, but

through a combination of my innate magic which let me see the inner workings of a body and the sheer force of node power I had pulled during that first transformation, I somehow lived.

The fear-laden lecture delivered by my grandmother after she learned what I had done had an unintended consequence. Though our family had studied the anatomy of wolves and a few other creatures for generations, and shifting into those forms was commonplace while on node lands, I couldn't do it. After my successful transformation into a dragon, I had learned to fear the dangers of shifting, and I could not bring myself to try another form, even more than a decade later.

I knew my body as a human and a dragon, and that was all.

It meant our secret was harder to hide, even with the help of the residents of Wulfkin and Ortfel. The villagers did their best to protect their healers, but they could only hide so much. Gideon wasn't the first who had come to Drakona to hunt dragons.

Since he didn't believe the villagers' stories that the dragon flew over the forest but roosted in the mountains, it was now up to me to convince him.

I spent most of the morning flying in lazy zigzags over the river, where the hunter would be sure to spot me in the sky. When I didn't catch so much as a glimpse of him, I widened my flight path, soaring over the forest, with my eyes trained on the land below. In dragon form, my eyesight was keen enough to pick out the individual leaves on trees from miles away.

I had been in the air for hours by the time the hunter spotted me soaring over a clearing. I wondered what he had been doing all that time. Hoping to catch a dragon slinking between the trunks of the trees?

I set a course for the river, meandering, but clear enough that the hunter would certainly head in the correct direction. Once he reached the river—where he should have been watching for me in the first place—I'd have enough time in his sight that I could set the trail for the mountains.

I reached the river and fell back into the zigzag pattern I had used earlier. It kept me visible from the riverbank for most of the path but limited my progress upstream to a pace a human could match.

When I spotted Scarlette at the edge of the river, her head tilted up with a single hand shading her eyes, I had the sudden urge to spin through the air or indulge in other showy maneuvers. I wanted her to notice me. But

I didn't need to do a trick to catch her attention. I stopped flying back and forth and followed the path of the river.

That's when I noticed that Scarlette's hair was unbound, and she had loosened the top laces of her bodice. She was standing by a relatively calm section of the river. Perfect for swimming. And I had sent Gideon on a path directly toward her.

I had to make her return to the cottage.

I dove, my wings spread wide as I aimed straight at her. It would be terrifying. She'd probably scream and bring Gideon directly to her even faster, but that was better than letting him stumble across her once she was already in the river.

She didn't scream. I risked going even lower, but she didn't react until I was over the river in front of her. She fell, and I beat my wings, angling upward at the sharpest incline I could manage. That should do it.

I kept gaining altitude, wanting to see if Gideon had emerged from the tree line anywhere downstream. I leveled out at a height that let me scan miles of the riverbank, but I didn't see him. Letting an air current carry me back the other direction, I saw Scarlette. She hadn't left.

As I watched, she finished unlacing her bodice and pulled it off.

I didn't make a conscious decision to dive. I folded my wings back and hurtled toward the ground. At the last possible moment, I flared my wings, slowing my descent, and pulled on the node's power.

I dropped to the ground in human form, the force of my landing sending me into a crouch. I caught myself with a single hand and pushed upright, grabbing the leather thong with the summons crystals from where it had landed as I did. "What are you doing?"

Scarlette gaped at me. Her cheeks grew red. She tried to look anywhere but at me.

Ward help me, she was more concerned with my lack of clothes than the fact that I had been a dragon moments earlier. We didn't have time for this. I snapped my fingers, and her gaze snapped back into focus on my face. "Scarlette. What are you doing out here when you know Gideon is skulking about?"

"I was hot after picking blackberries." Her voice had an edge I had never heard from her. "I wanted to go for a swim. What are you doing?"

"Trying to scare you into showing a little sense! There was a dragon diving at you. *I* was a dragon a moment ago. Why aren't you screaming?"

“Do you want me to scream?”

Ward save me, how could she be this calm? “I wanted you to show a sense of self-preservation.”

“I didn’t think the dragon . . . you . . . would hurt me.” Finally, her composure slipped. She stumbled over the words as she fully absorbed the situation. I supposed shock could affect people oddly. “You’re the dragon.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose. I should be worrying about the fact that I had exposed my secret to her, but it hardly felt critical compared to everything else. “Yes, I’m the dragon. And I was trying to lure the hunter to the mountains. He’ll be in this part of the forest any minute now. What were you doing? Did you want him to stumble across you naked?”

“Of course not! I just wanted to go for a swim. He isn’t hunting me.” She glanced behind her at the forest, then faced me once more, her voice dropping to a whisper. “He’s hunting you. You have to leave.”

“You’re worried about me?” I asked incredulously.

Her eyes were wide with the fear I had tried to instill earlier. “If he’s close, you need to go now.”

She was extraordinary. I dove at her in dragon form, shifted into human form before her eyes, warned her that another man was on his way to where she was about to bathe in a river, and her only concern was I was the huntsman’s target.

She was also right. Except, I didn’t know how close the hunter was. “I can’t risk shifting back,” I told Scarlette. “He can’t know that I’m the dragon.”

She didn’t ask questions. She bit her lip, then her attention snagged on something behind me. “Get in the water.”

“What?”

“Get in the water,” Scarlette repeated. Her hands flattened against my chest and she pushed gently. “It will explain your lack of clothes.”

I took a step back. I was right on the edge of the river. A branch snapped somewhere in the trees behind us and Scarlette pushed harder, her eyes bright with fear.

Reflex had me clamping my hands on her wrists as I fell. I tried to let go, but it was too late.

Nine

Scarlette

I toppled into the river with Ranulf below me. The cool water closed over my head, and I pushed against the warm expanse of muscled chest and flailed for the surface. My skirts tangled in my legs. My hair drifted out in every direction. Finally, my feet found purchase on the riverbed and I stood.

Ranulf wrestled his way upright, and I splashed him. “I can’t believe you did that!”

He raised his hands in surrender. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to; I reacted before I could think.”

The water only came to just above our waists, and despite getting a good look at him earlier, I was entranced by the sight of his chest. Something about watching the droplets slide down from his black hair and over those delicious muscles was mesmerizing. The necklace with multiple charms hanging off it only made the lack of anything else on his body even more apparent. It was a statement that clothes simply didn’t matter, or he’d have put in the same effort to keep them with him. The man hadn’t shown even a sliver of self-consciousness about being naked, and I could see why.

I closed my eyes for a moment. I should be reeling over the discovery that he could turn into a dragon, but somehow that seemed inconsequential compared to nakedness. Shapeshifting was a legend. Naked Ranulf was a too real temptation. “This was not what I had planned for my swim.”

When I opened my eyes, he was scowling at me. “Why did you even plan to go for a swim? You know Gideon is wandering the woods.”

“And he should be far from the cottage by this point. Besides, I figured the risk was minimal. He only cares about finding the dragon. He wanted to pay me to sleep with you and learn anything you knew, not get under my skirts himself.”

His expression somehow grew even fiercer. “You’re kidding.”

I shook my head. “Nope. A half silver for the information and another half silver for how I was to obtain it.” I considered our current predicament. “If he sees this, he’s going to think I changed my mind.”

I should get out of the river. Ranulf could pretend he was swimming without me.

I needed a chance to fully comprehend everything that had happened in the last quarter-hour. I couldn’t do that until I got away from distraction.

I started to turn, but Ranulf’s hands clamped on my hips, pulling me toward him. I gasped, startled by the sudden movement, and incredibly conscious of the minimal barrier between our bodies. He had pulled me close enough that there was no mistaking his reaction to our situation.

His lips barely moved, and his voice wouldn’t carry past the riverbank. “If that branch was Gideon, then he might be waiting at the tree line, watching us. Don’t turn around.”

“Why not?” My voice trembled. I wanted to put my hands back on his chest, to run them up over his shoulders, then back down below the water. But not with an audience. “It will look like pure chance if I turn and notice him. Then he can’t spy on us.”

“If you turn around, you will be giving him a view he has no right to.”

I glanced down at my chest. The water stopped below my breasts, but my tumble into the river had soaked me from head to toe. My thin shirt was completely transparent, plastered against my curves, leaving nothing to the imagination.

My cheeks heated, and I glanced up, expecting to see Ranulf looking at my chest.

He wasn’t. His forest green eyes were on my face, dark and searching.

My lips parted.

“May I kiss you, Scarlette?”

I threw my arms around his neck, forgetting about Gideon, not caring about anything but Ranulf’s body, all the places it touched mine, and all the places it could be touching. “Please do.”

He moved slowly, lowering his head the short distance between us with his eyes still locked on mine. Then his lips met mine and my eyes drifted closed. I could feel Ranulf’s hand fisting in my hair, but his lips were gentle against mine. He kept the kiss light. It was at once both the fairy-tale perfect dream young girls imagined for their first kiss and the

heart pounding fulfillment women wanted from their lover. He gradually increased the pressure and sucked on my bottom lip.

I moved closer to him, seeking the heat of his body, but my shirt was a cool distraction against my skin. I let go of Ranulf and fumbled for the hem of my shirt.

He pulled back. “What are you doing?”

“I want this shirt off.”

Ranulf caged my wrists in one of his large hands. “Not here. That damn hunter might still be lurking in the woods.”

“Affenala curse him.” My shoulders slumped, and I rested my cheek against his shoulder.

Ranulf released my hands and began combing his fingers through my hair. “I didn’t think Affenala indulged in curses.”

“Under the circumstances, I think the goddess would sympathize with my frustration.”

“I don’t think Gideon is watching us, but I’d rather err on the side of caution. If that branch snapping was him, I think he probably saw us and moved on.”

“That would make sense. He’d assume the lure of his silver was too much for me; he wouldn’t want to interrupt my fact-finding mission.” I groaned. “I’m going to have to explain that I didn’t learn anything. He will not take it well.”

“Why bother? Take his coin and tell him the same things the villagers do, that the dragon flies over the forest occasionally, but makes his nest in the mountains.”

“I’m fine lying to him, but I’d feel guilty taking his coin as I did so.”

“Why? The money will do more good in your hands than his.”

I laughed and hugged Ranulf a little tighter. “I’ll still have to tell him I haven’t learned anything yet. It might be suspicious if I convinced you to spill all your secrets after a single frolic in the river.”

Ranulf snorted. “I’m touched that you think I’d be that tough to crack, but you are selling yourself short, Scarlette. It didn’t even take a ‘frolic in the river’ for me to divulge my secrets. I have no defenses against you.”

His casual pronouncement stunned me enough that I barely noticed him untangling himself from my hair. He tilted my chin up for a quick kiss and stepped back. “Stay here and stay facing the far bank. I’ll make sure Gideon isn’t waiting nearby.”

The walk back to the cottage was not the most comfortable for several reasons. My sodden skirts made me trip multiple times. The feel of my bodice laced up over a wet shirt was surprisingly uncomfortable, and my heart and mind were in a deadly battle that would leave no survivors.

Ranulf had decided that shifting and returning to the meadow where he had left his clothes would be safer than risking crossing paths with Gideon while walking back to the cottage naked.

That left me alone with my thoughts, which couldn't stop trying to find a hidden meaning in Ranulf's words. My heart insisted that he had risked exposure to protect me and that his statement of not having any defenses against me was practically a declaration of love. My mind pointed out that Ranulf was a kind man—much as he wanted to hide that fact—and the way he had put my safety above his own didn't have to mean anything more than the fact that he was a good person. Under the circumstances, his words didn't have to mean anything beyond the fact that he was attracted to me.

If my heart was right, then I might get to enjoy a few days of bliss. Then I had to return home. Even the most devout disciple of Affenala would admit that expecting anything more was unrealistic. Suppose I delivered the charm to Mama and came back. I didn't have a life here. How long would Ranulf's feelings last when I was constantly underfoot, contributing nothing? We had known each other for less than a week. A sane person did not plan their entire future around a single week, especially not one that was an exception to the norm.

If my mind was right, then I might still have those few days of bliss, but it wouldn't be quite the same. Purely physical relationships rarely appealed to me. I wanted more. I already knew my time with Ranulf was limited, though, so asking for more made no sense.

Eventually, I realized that it didn't matter what Ranulf had meant, since I couldn't decide what I wanted. The only conclusions I reached were that I wanted to bed him and that, given the slightest push, I'd fall for him.

The cottage was empty when I returned, so I hurried upstairs to change. Ranulf had told me his sister kept a few changes of clothing in a trunk in the attic and I was welcome to borrow them. Given that I only had

spare undergarments with me, and my skirt and now wet bodice would soak through them within minutes, I decided to accept the offer.

Rosalia was a little shorter than me, and more slender, but not enough to make the clothes ridiculous. The skirt and petticoat didn't quite reach my ankles, and the edges of the bodice didn't meet when I laced it up, but the fit was good enough.

Dry and dressed, I went back downstairs and got started on the pie. The cottage had a wonderful little oven built into the brickwork of the fireplace, and by the time I had finished assembling the pie, it was hot enough. I stuck to the familiar cast-iron pot for a loaf of bread, but I had to admit, the oven was a wonderful convenience. Back home, I had to barter with the tavern keeper for the use of his ovens if I wanted to make something like a pie.

I slid the pie into the oven and went to clean up.

The garden door opened, and I smiled, expecting to see Ranulf. Instead, a woman with the same black hair, albeit threaded with a bit of silver, entered the cottage. She looked barely older than my mother, though I knew she had to be at least two decades older, with a straight spine and arms corded with muscle.

I remembered my first conversation with Ranulf, when I told him he was too muscular to pass as a grandmother and he had told me I clearly hadn't met his. I clapped a hand over my mouth to hold back a giggle.

The woman cocked her head to the side and considered me. Despite her obvious strength, there was a hint of exhaustion in her hazel eyes. "You don't look like a dragon-hunter."

"That would be Gideon, not me. Please, sit down. I'll make you some tea. There is also soup over the fire." I had been waiting for Ranulf to return to eat.

She sat at the head of the table. "You are very comfortable in my kitchen."

"Taking over a few household tasks was the least I could do. Your grandson is making a charm for me that I can't afford." I ladled out a bowl of soup and put the kettle over the fire.

Grandmother Molle accepted the bowl. "Ranulf is letting you help around the house?"

I smiled. "I didn't give him much of a choice, then bribed him with bread and pie."

Ranulf's grandmother laughed. "Smart girl. What's your name?"

"Scarlette."

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Scarlette. Now, tell me about this dragon-hunter. All we heard down in Ortfel was that someone was asking around about dragons."

"His name is Gideon. He arrived in Wulfkin a few days ago and did everything he could to convince the villagers to share what they knew. He offered silver; when that didn't work, he tried to get everyone drunk, but Mistress Weslet was having none of it." I prepared two mugs of tea and brought them both to the table. "He arrived at the cottage yesterday. He is out looking for the dragon now."

I stopped there, not sure if I should say anything that betrayed that I knew the identity of the dragon. I wasn't fond of deception, but I figured it was Ranulf's decision to tell his grandmother that he had let an outsider in on the secret.

Did everyone in the villages know? Mistress Weslet must, it was why she had needed to send a note to Ranulf. Was the secret only that Ranulf could change forms, or was there more to it?

"The hunter is staying here?"

I pulled my thoughts back to the conversation at hand. "He wouldn't take no for an answer, and unlike me, he can pay for his room."

My questions would have to wait for later. Not that I truly expected Ranulf to explain everything.

Grandmother Molle waved her hand through the air in a dismissive gesture. "That room is meant for people in need. You have more right to it than the huntsman."

The garden door opened again.

"Nana!" Ranulf crossed to his grandmother's side in a few easy strides and kissed her on the cheek. "Everything went well with the birth?"

I rose, letting Ranulf and his grandmother talk. I prepared another mug of tea and grabbed two more bowls for soup.

"I was there. Of course it went well. I stayed a few extra days to make sure mother and child were doing well. They are strong. They'll be fine now."

"Did you hear about the dragon-hunter?"

"I did. Scarlette was just telling me more about him."

Ranulf looked at me, a question in his eyes. I carried the soup to the table and gave him the tiniest shake of my head.

His lips pressed together for a moment, then he looked at his grandmother and one shoulder lifted in a minuscule shrug. “I planned to lead him off toward the mountains today, but encountered a few complications.”

Grandmother Molle looked at me. It was a considering look, not mad or accusatory. My cheeks flamed under the attention, remembering exactly what form one complication had taken.

I darted a glance at Ranulf and saw that his cheeks had taken on a rosy hue as well.

“Complications,” Grandmother Molle said dryly.

Ranulf nodded. “The hunter wasn’t watching the sky. The idiot stayed under the trees most of the day. It took me hours to catch his attention. I planned to lead him up the river, then veer off to the mountains, but he never made it. I’ve given up for the day. Scarlette’s charm still needs work.”

Grandmother Molle set her spoon down. Her bowl was empty. “You seem to have everything in hand here. If you don’t need me, then I think I’m going to take a nap. The trip from Ortfel is harder on my old bones these days.”

Ranulf rose and kissed his grandmother’s cheek once more. “Rest, Nana. We’ll survive without your help for a few more hours.”

His grandmother got to her feet and moved down the short hall to the bedrooms. She went into hers and closed the door.

Ranulf watched her. Then a few seconds after the door closed, he cursed.

“What is it?”

“With Grandmother back, we now have four people and only three bedrooms.”

I blinked. “You are kidding, right?”

He scowled. “I will not assume that you are comfortable with me sharing your room, and I’m certainly not sharing with Gideon.”

I pressed my lips together to hide a smile as I imagined how Ranulf would react if someone told him he had to share a room with the hunter. “You’d probably kill him.”

Ranulf crossed his arms. “No. I refuse to let him turn me into a murderer. I’d transform him into a frog.”

I blinked. He sounded serious. “Can you do that?”

I supposed it wasn’t so far-fetched, considering he turned into a dragon.

“Theoretically.” He shrugged and uncrossed his arms. “It is much harder to affect a different person than yourself. That’s why it takes so much effort for a mage to heal somebody, yet their own body will heal at an unnatural rate even if they are unconscious. With the node, I have enough power to shrink a human down to frog size, but I don’t have the knowledge to perform the transformation successfully.”

He paused. “Actually, I can only shift myself between human and dragon forms. I should be able to do more, but I developed a mental block as a child.” Ranulf frowned. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

I let the smile I had tried to hold in stretch across my face. “You are talking to me.”

“I don’t understand.”

“A few days ago, I could barely get you to answer a question with yes or no. Now you are volunteering information.” Whatever had changed between us, it was more than physical attraction. There was more between us.

Ranulf shrugged, but despite his show of nonchalance, I knew he was embarrassed. “You already know my biggest secret. It isn’t like anything else I tell you can top that.”

“That’s not the point.” I stood up and rounded the table. Ranulf shifted in his seat, turning as best he could to face me when I stopped at his side. I leaned down and kissed him, a fleeting press of my lips against his, then straightened. “I need to check on the pie.”

I felt his eyes on me as I moved to the fireplace. He didn’t say anything, but it was no longer because he didn’t want to. No, Ranulf didn’t know what to say to me. I pulled the pie from the oven and set it in the kitchen to cool.

Ranulf jerked to his feet. “I should work on your charm.”

He settled into a chair in the front of the cottage, and I let him be. I wanted to tease him more, but the mention of the charm reminded me why I was here. I had to remember that I only had a few more days with Ranulf. I shouldn’t push for more than was already between us. The result would only be pain.

Ten
Ranulf

Scarlette, Grandmother, and I enjoyed a peaceful supper without the huntsman. Then Scarlette set out about cleaning and Grandmother pulled me aside to hear exactly what had been going on while she was away.

By the time Gideon returned to the cottage, twilight had descended, and the dark of night in the forest was almost complete. He stomped into the cottage, gave Grandmother a sharp look, and helped himself to the remaining soup without a word.

"Don't worry," Scarlette whispered. She had pulled a chair from the table over next to me after she finished cleaning, and started talking about all the healing tinctures and salves stored in the guest room with Grandmother. "I put the leftover pie in the chill box. He doesn't have a reason to check it, so he won't know there is any."

"Good," I whispered back.

Grandmother smiled at us and stood. "I'm off to bed. We'll go foraging tomorrow, Scarlette, and I can show you the plants you are unfamiliar with."

"I look forward to it."

Scarlette fit in at the cottage. She and Grandmother had taken to each other immediately. It felt like she had always been here. I wanted her to always be here, and that worried me. I knew better than to expect anything and had thought—maybe—I could give into my attraction so long as I remembered her stay was temporary. Looking down at her when we stood in the river, seeing the way her lips had parted, I hadn't been able to think about anything other than kissing her. Then, as I made my way home alone, I had convinced myself I could maintain a wall between the physical and the emotional.

Scarlette had her own life, far from Drakona Forest. Even if she didn't have her mother to think about, she deserved more than a life of isolation in the middle of the forest. I couldn't expect her to stay here forever.

I'd just keep reminding myself of that fact.

She must have sensed my shift in mood, because her smile dimmed. "Are you alright?"

"Fine. Just tired after waking so early this morning."

"Oh, right. Why don't you go up to bed, then?"

I frowned. Had I misunderstood Scarlette this afternoon? Well, whether I had read too much into her words—and kiss—or not, I wasn't leaving her down here with Gideon. I stood up and pulled her with me. "Let's go."

She tugged, and I immediately released her arm. "I should wash the pot."

I shook my head. "I'll take care of it."

"But you are tired."

"Not that tired," I mumbled.

She studied me, her hazel eyes seeing right through me. She grabbed my hand. "Let's go upstairs. The pot can wait until morning."

She released my hand when we reached the narrow hallway and led the way to the attic stairs. I looked over my shoulder and saw Gideon watching us, a smug smile on his face.

Scarlette glanced back at me, her eyes wide. "Did you just growl?"

I wasn't aware that I had made any sound, but growling certainly fit my mood. "I don't like the huntsman or the way he thinks of you."

"I'm aware," Scarlette said, starting her way up the narrow stairs. "That's why I suggested we both go upstairs. You weren't going to leave me alone with him."

"Of course not." I followed her up. I tried not to stare at her ass the entire way, but it was a losing battle.

"I do still have the enchantment you gave me, you know."

"Good. Keep it with you." I closed the trapdoor and looked around the room. The bed that had belonged to Rosalia when we were children caught my eye, and I grimaced. I had sat there carving symbols into wooden discs the first night after I met Scarlette. It was a mess.

I crossed the room and tried to sweep the wood shavings into a tidy pile.

“You are going to get splinters if you sleep there,” Scarlette announced.

I turned and froze. She had already removed her kerchief and was busy working on the laces of her bodice. She faced me, making no attempt to shield her body. The invitation was clear.

I closed the distance between us in quick strides, and her fingers faltered on the laces. Reaching out with a single finger, I tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “Are you certain, Scarlette?”

Her head tilted, pressing into my hand. “Your magic can prevent conception, right?”

I should have thought of that earlier. “Right.”

“Then I’m certain.”

I cupped her face between both palms and kissed her. I meant it to be soft, a promise of what was to come, but once our lips met, my control slipped. I licked at her and groaned when she opened without hesitation. My tongue swept inside, tasting her. I gave myself until we were both gasping for breath, then stepped back.

“Let me get the enchantment.” I went back to the other bed.

“Do you need one?”

I found a disc waiting for the contraceptive spell, with a hole already drilled into the top to let it hang from a cord or ribbon. “Magic requires focus. My attention will be on other things.”

Scarlette laughed, the sound rich and full. I resisted the urge to turn back to her. I had to make the enchantment first, and looking at Scarlette would not help me manage the magic. Pulling enough power to last the night into the wood, I shaped it into the correct form. Since I didn’t need to make it last long or set a way for a non-mage to activate the power, it only took about a minute.

I turned around, and the disc slipped from my fingers.

Scarlette had used the time to finish undressing. She stood next to the bed, clothed in nothing but her hair. The long red strands ended just above her nipples, drawing my gaze. I continued tracing the path down her body with my eyes until I reached the patch of red curls at the apex of her thighs.

“Are you going to pick that up?” She put her hands on her hips.

I swallowed and bent down to retrieve the enchantment. A flick of power activated the spell. I walked over and held it out. “You’ll need to wear it,” I explained, though I was certain she knew that already.

The enchantments were commonplace in all parts of the kingdom. If you didn't want to make a man permanently infertile, the contraceptive talisman had to be used by the woman. Most healers made them as necklaces or rings.

Scarlette looked at the plain disc with its hole and tugged a small section of her hair free. She braided it with nimble fingers, then took the charm and threaded it onto her hair. She knotted it in place and tossed the entire section of hair over that shoulder, baring her breast completely.

I couldn't resist any longer. Giving into temptation, I lowered my mouth to her breast. Scarlette arched into me and held my head in place. She went up on tiptoe, but it wasn't enough. I placed my hands on her thighs, just below her ass, and urged her to jump. She wrapped her legs around me, and I was hard pressed not to fall at the pleasure of her core pressed against my aching erection.

I spun around and toppled onto the bed, switching my attention to her neglected breast and rocking against her wet heat.

"Ranulf." Her fingers scrabbled at my shirt, tugging it up. I'd have to stop what I was doing to pull it off, and I didn't want to. "Ranulf, I need skin against skin."

There was so much soft skin to explore. I ran my hands down her thighs, then back up. Then higher. She locked her legs tighter around me.

"Naked, Ranulf." She writhed when I pinched her nipple. She tugged at my hair until I met her eyes. "Either strip, or start talking to me, damn it."

I kissed my way up her chest and to her throat. My words came in short bursts between kisses. "You are so beautiful. Sunshine given form. A ray of brightness cutting through the fog. I want to worship you as the goddess you are."

She moaned.

I slid a hand down between our bodies and rubbed at her clit. "I have never wanted anyone the way I want you. Your smiles bring me joy, and I want to give you that same pleasure in return."

I kissed her mouth and added a touch of magic to amplify the sensations caused by my fingers. She splintered in my arms, but I didn't stop. I stretched her release out for as long as I could before gentling my touch and dropping kisses on her eyelids and the tip of her nose.

Finally, she blinked her eyes open again. "I didn't expect you to choose talking."

I grinned. “I know.”

I ached with the need to be inside her, but watching her come undone in my arms was worth the frustration. Knowing I had brought her to that point was a potent feeling, and at least half her enjoyment had come from the words. I wasn’t sure I’d be able to string any together once I was inside her.

She traced the shape of my lips with a finger. “You should smile more. It suits you. Though maybe it’s better that you are usually scowling and silent. You are potent.”

“You haven’t had too much already, have you?”

She shook her head.

“Good, because I’m not done.” Rising from the bed, I stripped off my clothes. Then I returned to my spot between her thighs.

Scarlette splayed her hands against my abdomen the moment I was within reach. “I’ve wanted to do this since I first saw you.”

“Instead, you pushed me into the river.”

“Not today. The first time I saw you, Ranulf.”

I kissed her. “Me too. Why do you think I was so insistent that you leave? I never stood a chance of resisting you. You are going to destroy me, Scarlette.”

The words were unvarnished truth, and I wondered if she understood that I was referring to more than the physical. Then she tilted her hips and took my cock in her hand, and my thoughts splintered. She squeezed once, then notched me at the entrance to her body. “We’ll destroy each other.”

I surged into her, succumbing to the physical sensations. Scarlette would do more than wring me dry. When she left, she’d take her all the joy and laughter with her, leaving me once more in the shadows. But I couldn’t focus on that now. At least here, in bed, we were equal in our need for each other.

I thrust into her, the pressure building. She met my movements with her own. Her hand tangled in my hair and pulled me down for a kiss that was as wild as the rest of our joining. I felt myself coming apart and managed to pull enough magic to flick a burst of pleasure through her. It was enough to send her hurtling into her next release. I joined her, her pleasure intensifying my own.

I collapsed, careful not to put my entire weight on her. She wrapped her arms around me and pulled me more fully onto her. After a few

heartbeats, I pulled out of her and flipped us so that she sprawled atop me. I reached out and brushed her hair behind her ear once more.

"Ranulf?"

"Yes?"

"I know I gave you the choice of naked or talking, but do you think we could maybe do both for a little bit? Staying just like this, but talking? I have so many questions."

"I was wondering how you had taken everything so in stride today. Ask your questions, Scarlette. I'll answer."

Eleven

Scarlette

I slipped out of bed, careful not to wake Ranulf. Abandoning his embrace—the perfection of waking pressed against him, my back to his chest—was hard. If he had woken or tightened his arms around me, I wasn't sure I would have managed.

Light filtered through the single window, just enough for me to dress. I had to remember that all dreams came to an end, even the ones you wished could last forever. Ranulf and I had always had an end date, even when we didn't have each other. In a few days, I would leave and he would remain.

I tied my kerchief over my hair, and my fingers brushed against the wooden disc I had braided into it the night before. I unknotted my hair and set the enchantment gently on the small table by the side of the bed. It felt like I was saying goodbye already.

The trapdoor opened with a creak, and I froze. Ranulf didn't move. I climbed down the stairs, lowering the door carefully back into place. I wondered if he would feel the same pain as me at parting, or if he would rejoice in a return to his solitary existence. I wanted to believe that he would miss me, that perhaps my short time in the cottage had been enough to make him see that solitude was also loneliness. Yet at the same time, I didn't want him to feel a loss when I left. I wanted him to find happiness, even if it couldn't be with me.

The short hallway between bedrooms let out into the main room of the cottage, and I spotted Grandmother Molle. Of course. Ranulf wouldn't be alone, even after I left.

"The kettle is hot, and the bread is rising," the healer said when she saw me.

I had slept in later than usual and she had completed my morning routine. "I apologize. I should have been down earlier to start the bread."

“None of that, dear. I’ve made bread without help longer than your mother has been alive.”

“And so, you deserve to rest even more. There is so little I can do to thank your family for all the help you have given me.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll keep you busy this morning when we go foraging. I’m too old to be digging in the dirt all day.”

I poured myself a mug of tea. “Grandmother, I have no doubt you will jump up from a crouch without hesitation while I creak and groan. I look forward to saving you the effort, all the same.”

She cradled her mug between both hands and took a sip. “I think I will enjoy having you around, Scarlette.”

I blew on the steaming contents of my mug, hiding my lips from view as I fought to steady my expression. “I won’t be around for long, though.”

Grandmother Molle’s eyes narrowed. “We’ll see.”

“I have to bring the charm home to my mother. I’m leaving in a few days.”

“A journey made in one direction can be completed in the reverse.” The healer set the mug on the table. “Now, the bread should be ready to bake.”

I moved toward the pot already heating in the coals of the fireplace before she could do more than slide her chair back. “I’ll take care of it, Grandmother.”

Ranulf came downstairs shortly after the bread finished. I avoided his gaze, afraid I’d give myself away if I looked at him. I knew better than to burden him with the weight of my growing feelings.

He didn’t try to engage me in conversation, which should have been both expected and a relief. Instead, I felt bereft. I wanted him to talk to me without prompting, even though I knew the silence was better for us both.

Grandmother Molle observed us, and silence reigned over the breakfast table.

Ranulf wolfed down his food, shoving back from the table only minutes after sitting down. “The hunter’s still in bed?”

His grandmother nodded and took a sip from her second mug of tea this morning.

“I’ll head out now.” Ranulf strode through the kitchen door without a backward glance.

Grandmother Molle looked at the dirty plate still on the table and sighed. “I swear I tried to teach that boy some manners.”

“He’s distracted,” I offered.

She gave me an arch look. “Yes, I daresay he is.”

I blushed. “I meant because of the huntsman.”

“No.” She rose from the table, collecting her plate and Ranulf’s. “He knows how to handle that situation. I think it is something else entirely twisting him up right now.”

I brought my dishes to the sink and pumped water. “I don’t mean to twist him up.”

“No, you’d never do such a thing on purpose. But you have more power over my boy than you realize, Scarlette.” She placed a hand over mine on the pump, her skin tan and weathered from a life of hard work. “We’ll deal with the dishes later. Let’s go into the forest before the sun gets too high.”

I grabbed a basket and followed her out of the cottage.

True to her word, Grandmother Molle kept me busy for several hours. She taught me about the plants used to make the medicines that supplemented her healing magic. I learned the best places to hunt for feverfew, how to recognize bloodroot blooms, and the most efficient way to harvest bark from the beech trees.

Then the conversation shifted. I found myself telling her about my first meeting with Ranulf and the way he had sent me back to Wulfkin, only for Mistress Weslet to send me back to the cottage the next day. “That’s why it wasn’t as much of a shock as it should have been to discover Ranulf is the dragon, I think. I knew something was going on, because of how the villagers treated Gideon and their urgent need to tell Ranulf that a hunter was in the woods.”

“Ah. Yes, the villagers do their best to protect our secrets.”

“Why is it a secret?” I had asked Ranulf a few questions about his shifting last night, but I had fallen asleep before getting to that one.

“People tend to react to power in two ways. They either fear it or covet it. It is hard to convince them to be grateful for a power they don’t possess.” Grandmother Molle bent and added a few mushrooms to her basket. “After the Node Wars, the families with blood-locks had to learn this lesson. They had access to vast stores of power, but only in a limited area. Every family had to find a way to protect themselves.”

“I can see how some mages could protect themselves, but so many powers would be useless for such a thing.”

“Indeed. The barrier-mages could wall off their territory, and several did. To this day, there are nodes that people can only visit under direct supervision. The mages must personally allow the person through the ward. They are protected, but also isolated.”

I continued stripping bark off a tree, careful not to take too much. “But most of the nodes would be locked to other powers.”

“Yes. The rest of us had to be more creative. The Truthholders made themselves indispensable to the king and earned a duchy in the process. They protected themselves by amassing political power alongside the magical.” Grandmother Molle gestured for me to follow her down another path. “Most of us wanted an answer in the middle of the extremes. The war had finally ended, and mages wanted to enjoy their node-ties without isolating themselves or being forced to rely on political power to protect their hard-won peace.”

“Your ancestors made themselves invaluable to the communities surrounding them,” I said. “The villages are a buffer between you and the rest of the world.”

“Exactly, but a buffer can only do so much. They know our secrets, because we use our shifting to help them, traveling through the forest at speeds they can’t match in an emergency.” She shrugged. “Before the Node Wars ended, the mages of my family shifted into dragon form regularly. Their journals recount the glory of flying over the continent, tearing enemies to shreds, and raining fire down on armies. Our power was one of war, a thing to be feared.”

“That’s why Ranulf shifted into a dragon. He read those journals.” The temptation to live up to the legends of his ancestors must have been too much.

Grandmother Molle nodded. “He was young. He wanted to do something to catch his mother’s attention. I’m still not sure how he managed the transformation. After the war ended, my ancestors decided not to shift into dragon form any more. They only had enough power for the transformation if they stayed close to the node. They knew they’d be hunted. So, they let shifting become a thing of myth, a lost art. But though the family no longer passed on the knowledge that allowed a person to assume a dragon’s form, we never gave up shifting completely.”

Catch his mother's attention. The mother who preferred roaming to living in the forest. For the first time, I wondered how much she had been around as Ranulf grew up. But I wouldn't ask Grandmother Molle. It wasn't my place to probe into such sensitive topics.

"What form do you shift into?" I asked instead, though the secrets I was learning no longer held much interest for me.

"A wolf. Some members of the family have studied other animals and mastered those forms as well, but most of us are content with shifting into wolves. It requires less power than many forms, because our mass stays about the same. If I didn't mind draining myself and being stuck for a day or so until my power replenished, I could even shift into wolf form away from the node."

I glanced at the two summons crystals Grandmother Molle wore on a necklace, just like Ranulf. "In an emergency, you can run to the village in wolf form to perform a healing."

"Not all the way to the village. Magic is nearly impossible to manage as an animal. We retain just enough control to shift back into human form, probably because our bodies want to return to that natural state. When one of the villages summons me, I run to the edge of the node's power and shift back to human form. The villagers send a rider out to meet me there. Well, that is what they used to do. These days, I let Ranulf carry me."

It took me a moment to realize she meant in dragon form. I wondered what it was like to ride a dragon. Equal parts thrilling and terrifying, most likely. Not that I'd ever find out first-hand.

We returned to the cottage around noon. Ranulf and Gideon were both gone. We put together a simple meal of vegetables, bread, and the cheese Grandmother Molle had brought back from Ortfel. As we ate, I noticed the glass cube sitting on the table. As far as I could tell, it had not moved since I first set it there, asking Ranulf to make a charm for my mother.

I frowned and picked it up. "Grandmother? Can you tell if any magic has been put into this charm?"

She shook her head. "Unless I was the one to channel it, I wouldn't be able to tell. Why?"

"This is the charm I gave Ranulf for my mother. He said it would take a week to make it. I understand that the arrival of the huntsman has caused delays, but it should be almost done. Except I don't think he has ever touched this."

I thought over the times I had seen Ranulf sitting in a chair, his fist clenched and eyes closed, as he worked on a charm. I had noticed the glass on the table and assumed that he had other charms to make, too. He couldn't forget all his other responsibilities to help someone who couldn't even pay him. And after the first couple of days, I had stopped worrying that he wasn't working on my charm at all. I assumed he worked on it at other times, when I wasn't watching.

But why would he always put it back on the table? How had I never seen him move it, even once?

Fear stabbed at me. Powerful, but muddled with an equal sense of confusion.

Grandmother Molle took the charm from me, patting my hand. "That doesn't sound like Ranulf. If he said he'd do it, then he would. Even when he first sent you away, he'd still have made the charm and brought it to you. I'll talk to him, see what's happening."

Twelve
Ranulf

Considering the day I'd had, the last thing I wanted was to find Grandmother waiting for me on the path to the cottage when I finished laying a false trail for the hunter.

I had woken up with an unexpected smile on my face before I realized I was alone in bed. I wasn't surprised that Scarlette had woken before me, but that she had slipped out stealthily enough that I hadn't even stirred did not bode well. Then she ignored me over breakfast.

Clearly, she thought last night had been a mistake.

After that, it had taken too long—again—for me to spot the hunter and lead him toward the mountains. I had spent two days in a row flying for hours, something I almost never did. My wings had disappeared along with my tail, but I still felt the ache of overtaxed muscles. I couldn't even heal them, since the muscles didn't actually exist in my human form.

Oh, and I hadn't eaten anything since this morning, and it was nearing suppertime.

I tried to skirt past my grandmother, but she refused to let me. She pointed toward a different path, one that led away from the cottage. "Walk with me."

"Nana, I'm tired and hungry."

"Then it is in your best interest to get this conversation over with quickly. Now, Ranulf."

I sighed and fell into step next to her. "What did I do?"

"You lied to a very sweet girl."

I frowned. She had to be talking about Scarlette, but what lie?

"I know you don't want her to leave," Grandmother continued, "but that is no excuse. The charm Rosalia made will only last about two more weeks, and it will take Scarlette a week to walk home. Her mother's health

is at risk. That needs to be taken care of before you try to convince her to make her home here."

I stopped walking. "What are you talking about?"

I wasn't surprised that Grandmother had figured out that I enjoyed having Scarlette around. But the rest of her admonishment made no sense. I knew Scarlette had to go home. I wasn't going to try to change her mind. Even before she snuck away from me this morning, I had known I couldn't pressure her to stay.

Grandmother reached into her pocket and pulled out a simple glass cube. "You lied to her about working on the charm all week."

I pinched the cube between thumb and forefinger. "This is not sufficient for what she needs. I could spend a month channeling as much node power as possible into this, and it would probably last a year or two at most. At which point Scarlette and her mother will be in the same situation as now, struggling to afford healings that don't solve the problem."

Grandmother began to smile. "You are finally using that ruby, aren't you?"

The gem, carved into a perfect cube, resonated not only with the node's healing power, but with me. No one knew why some mages worked better with certain gemstones, but every mage could feel a difference in how easily the power adhered to different materials. Any gem worked better than glass, but for me, rubies made the most powerful charms. They weren't worth the extra expense for most of the charms I made, but for Scarlette? The cost didn't matter.

My mother had gifted the gem to me years ago. An apology of sorts, one that showed how little she understood my anger. I didn't want an expensive gift; I had wanted my mother to be there for me as I grew up. I had ignored it for years but had known as soon as Scarlette explained her problem that it was time to make use of the ruby. When I finished, the charm wouldn't last a couple years, but a couple of decades.

"Of course I'm using the ruby. You didn't really believe I would lie about making a charm, did you?"

"People make unwise choices when driven by feelings they aren't used to. I know you don't want her to leave."

"What I want doesn't matter. She has a life to get back to. Her mother. Her job."

“She isn’t like your mother or sister, you know,” Grandmother said, reaching out to place a hand on my shoulder.

I wanted to claim I didn’t know what she meant, but I did. Nana understood why I was angry at my mother. She felt the same pain when Mother or Rosalia visited. I loved them, but every time they came to Drakona Forest, I was reminded that they’d never stay here. The forest was too small for them.

“She’ll leave too,” I said. “She has to.”

“But she isn’t driven by the need to wander. She wants to put down roots. She yearns for a place to call home.”

I spun away, breaking free of Grandmother’s touch. “She has a home. And it isn’t here.”

She clucked her tongue, the sound a familiar chiding. “The only thing she has in that village is her mother.”

I didn’t answer. I couldn’t. I wanted Grandmother to be right, but even if Scarlette didn’t see her village as home, that didn’t mean she’d want to make a cottage in the middle of the forest home, either. She didn’t even have family here, only me. I wasn’t convinced she wanted more than last night from me.

I wanted to be wrong.

The hard edges of the cube dug into my palm. It was a good thing the glass was solid or I’d have shattered it by now. I eased open my hand and looked at the unused charm. Maybe Scarlette’s mood this morning had nothing to do with regretting her decision the night before. Maybe she had seen the charm and decided, like Grandmother, that I had lied.

I turned and rushed past my grandmother, down the path and up to the cottage.

“Scarlette?” I called as I opened the door. “I need to talk to you.”

She stood at the kitchen counter, slicing bread. She stopped halfway through a slice and looked at me with wide hazel eyes. After a taut moment, she blurted, “Supper is almost ready.”

“Supper can wait.” I was starving, but this conversation was more important. Nana was wise enough to stay in the forest for a little longer, but she’d be back soon. I needed to talk to Scarlette now.

She finished slicing and set the knife down. “What do you need to say?”

I invited her to follow with a gesture and led the way to the sitting area. I placed the clear glass on the top of the tiny table set between the two chairs. Barely wide enough to hold two mugs of tea, the table also had a drawer too small to hold much of anything. I pulled it open and plucked out the ruby.

"This is your charm," I told Scarlette, handing her the gem. It was smaller than the cube she had given me, but still large enough that I had never dared to ask how much it had cost. "It isn't done, but I have been working on it."

She studied the stone, tilting it to see how it caught the light. "This isn't glass."

"No. Glass is fine for most charms, but gems work better. I wanted to make sure your charm was as powerful as I could make it."

She pushed it back toward me as if burned. "I can't afford something like this! I can never repay you for it."

I took the ruby and set it next to the glass on the table. I reached out, but stopped when Scarlette flinched. "It's a gift. You don't have to repay me."

I wanted to curse when I heard myself. I sounded angry. I was, but not at Scarlette. No, my anger was directed at a fate that had put her in a position of feeling that she owed everyone, that she was undeserving of kindness.

"It is too much," she whispered.

"It's not enough," I countered. "It still won't heal your mother, only hold the tumor in check. I wish I could do more, but this charm is the best I can manage."

I lifted my hand once more, moving slowly, begging Scarlette with my eyes not to flinch away again. I tucked a strand of hair that had come free of her kerchief behind her ear. "Scarlette—"

A bright light illuminated her face, casting her features with a blue tint. "Damn it." I slapped my hand over the summons crystal hanging from my neck, blocking the glow. There was an emergency in Ortfel. The timing couldn't be worse, but I couldn't ignore it. "We are not done with this conversation, Scarlette."

I lifted my hand, and the light once more shone through my shirt, bright enough to wake a person from a dead sleep. I ran to the guest room and found Grandmother's basket of remedies. She always brought herbal

mixtures when she went to the villages. Healing power could only do so much without overtaxing the body being treated. Tinctures and salves often helped ease the process or offered an alternative to healing the entire injury with magic.

I ran back into the main room of the cottage. Grandmother was already there, her own summons crystal glowing just as brightly.

Scarlette put together a packet of bread and cheese, wrapped in a napkin. When she saw the basket, she slipped it in next to the jars without comment.

"Thank you." I wanted to reach for her, to pull her close and kiss her, but now wasn't the time.

I walked over to my grandmother and showed her the basket. "Do you need anything else?"

She shook her head. "No. Let's go."

We hurried out of the cottage. I looked back over my shoulder, just before the trees hid the building from view. Scarlette stood in the doorway, watching us go.

"I want you to stay close," Grandmother told me as we approached a clearing where I could shift. It was a tight fit, but closer than going all the way to the river. "There's a greater chance of the huntsman seeing you if you fly back and forth. You can wait in the village square until I know how serious the emergency is."

I handed Grandmother the basket, went behind the tree I had hollowed out here, and began undressing. "You are afraid you'll need to return for more medicines or charms."

Grandmother had her eyes on the sky, facing away from the tree where I stashed my clothes and the meadow. "I was in Ortfel for over a week. They had the supplies needed to deal with just about any emergency. They wouldn't have risked calling us with the summoning crystal unless something terrible happened."

I walked out to the middle of the field, slipping my necklace off to let it dangle from my wrist. The light had gone out about halfway to the clearing, which was good, since I didn't need to carry a beacon along, showing the hunter exactly where I was going. I shifted. With a single stomp of my forepaw, I told Grandmother that it was safe for her to look. She joined me in the center of the clearing, and I knelt in such a way that she could use my front leg to climb onto my back.

“Ready,” she called a minute later, once she and the basket were secure.

I beat my wings and took off.

Thirteen
Scarlette

I watched the dragon soar off, Grandmother Molle perched on his back, with wonder. She was so small, it seemed she should tumble off with each flap of his wings, but she didn't even waver.

I stayed among the trees, hidden from notice until Ranulf became little more than a smudge of green against the pink and lavender sky. A dragon at sunset was an incredible sight.

I shouldn't have followed them, but I couldn't resist this chance to see him shift. After our impromptu swim in the river, I had looked away, and I hadn't been aware of what was happening when he shifted into human form before that. I wanted a memory of seeing Ranulf become the dragon to carry home with me.

"Well, well, well." Gideon's voice slid through the trees and across the clearing. He stepped out of the forest about the same distance away from the path Ranulf and Grandmother Molle had used as me, but on the other side. "This is a surprise."

He crossed the open space, stopping in front of me. "You failed to inform me this morning that your lover can transform into a dragon. And here I thought you had wanted that half silver."

I took a step back. "I was never going to help you hunt him."

"But you did. Even after lying to me, you kindly led the way to this clearing. I might never have discovered the truth if not for you. Now I know exactly where to find the dragon."

Dread filled me. The healers and villagers had kept the secret for generations, and I had ruined it all because I wanted to watch him shift? Affenala save me. Affenala save Ranulf. I had to do what I could to stop the hunter. "The dragon you are hunting doesn't exist. He is a man, not a beast."

“He is still a dragon.”

My hand slipped into my pocket, tightening on the enchanted stick Ranulf had given me the day before. “You can’t still intend to hunt him! He’s a healer. A human. It wouldn’t be hunting; it would be murder.”

“Maybe, if anyone knew it was possible for a man to shift into a dragon. But he’s kept it secret so well, hasn’t he? Even if the villagers support your wild tale, they’ll sound like fools. Jealous fools who want to rob a mighty hunter of his prey.” Gideon stepped closer. “The dragon almost had me convinced. I was ready to move closer to the mountains and his lair. But now, I don’t need to go anywhere. He’ll come right to me.”

“You can’t kill him,” I said in desperation.

Gideon slid the large knife at his waist from its sheath. “I’ll think you find that I can. I even have the perfect bait for the trap.”

He moved too quickly for me to react, grabbing me and pinning me against his chest, his knife at my throat. I swallowed, afraid even that movement would cause metal to split skin, but unable to stop myself. Men had tried to overpower me before, but never with a weapon. Never in the middle of a forest where even a scream wouldn’t attract attention. My limited tricks for dealing with drunks weren’t enough.

Ranulf had been right. I had underestimated the hunter. But he hadn’t. The protective enchantment was still wrapped in my fingers. Gideon’s arm held me in place against his body, but I still had the freedom to pull the stick from my pocket. I didn’t, unsure what would happen if I used it with Gideon’s blade pressed against my skin. Ranulf had mentioned a shock before muscles paralyzed. If Gideon flinched . . . better to bide my time. He couldn’t hold me like this forever if he hoped to attack Ranulf.

“How will this help you?” I asked. I didn’t have to feign fear, though I wasn’t afraid for myself. “You can’t shoot a dragon while holding me.”

“I already told you. You are the bait. All I need now is to set the trap.”

He released me unexpectedly, but before I could pull the stick from my pocket, a starburst of pain exploded at my temple.

Blackness engulfed me.

I WOKE ON my side in the clearing. My ankles were bound, as were my wrists. I awkwardly levered myself into a sitting position and scanned my surroundings. It was dark now, the light of the moon and stars barely enough to let me make out the hunter's form as he built his dragon trap in the middle of the clearing. I froze, but he hadn't noticed my movement.

Slowly, carefully, I pulled my knees up to my chin and looped my arms over my legs. The hunter's focus stayed on his current task, and a spark of hope filled me. He had bound my wrists in front. I worked on the knot at my ankles. It only took a few minutes to loosen the rope. I unwrapped my legs, but stayed where I was. I could run, but I didn't stand a chance against Gideon if—when—he chased me. Better to wait for a moment to take him by surprise.

The enchantment was still in my pocket. I pulled it out, wanting to be ready this time. My heart beat in my throat, and I gripped the stick with white-knuckled desperation.

Gideon finished whatever he was doing. Something with ropes and nets, I thought, but I couldn't make out the details. He swung his crossbow off his back, cocked it, and loaded a bolt into place. Then he crossed the clearing to my side. "Oh good, you are awake. I was thinking that a well-timed scream might help as the dragon flies overhead."

"I won't help you kill him." My voice came out steadier than I had expected.

"If you don't cooperate, I'll just have to make you scream myself when the time comes." He swung the crossbow in my direction for a moment, a smirk on his face, then went back to scanning the sky. The crossbow was no longer trained on me, and he stood only a few feet away.

I pinched the indentations of the enchantment and lunged. Affenala, let this work. The tip of the stick pressed against his leg, and his whole body spasmed. I congratulated myself on not using the enchantment earlier and getting my throat slit in the process. The crossbow slid from his hand, but miraculously didn't fire as it hit the ground. Gideon toppled over.

I grabbed the crossbow and backed up. With my hands still bound, I could barely hold the bow. When Gideon recovered, he'd knock it out of my hands in an instant. I studied him for a moment. His chest still moved. Whatever magic Ranulf had channeled into the stick hadn't stopped his heart or lungs.

I set the crossbow down carefully and approached with the enchanted stick held out in front of me. I reached for the knife sheathed at the hunter's waist. He twitched.

I shrieked and hit him with the enchantment once more. Then I pulled the knife free and rushed back to where I had left the crossbow. I sliced through the rope without cutting myself, and had the crossbow back in hand by the time Gideon began to move once more. My grip was surprisingly steady as I trained the weapon on him.

"I'm not bait," I told him as he got to his feet. He moved slowly, his muscles still twitching at irregular intervals. "And you won't be trapping any dragons here."

I kept the crossbow aimed at his torso. I knew next to nothing about weapons, but enough soldiers and hunters had passed through the tavern over the years that I knew a person didn't require training to do damage with a crossbow. At this distance, the bolt would even go through Gideon's chain mail.

Not that I intended to shoot him. But I couldn't let him think I would hesitate.

He sneered at me, but didn't close the distance between us. I didn't dare step closer either. His hand rested on his sword, which I had foolishly left with him. He could reach me with his weapon before I got close enough to shock him with the enchantment again. If the enchantment even had any power left.

The crossbow was my strongest defense, now.

Gideon loosened the sword in its sheath. "What's your plan now?"

I didn't let the crossbow waver. "Make you leave."

"Oh?"

I took a step closer, though still well out of reach of his blade. "Start walking. The path toward Wulfkin."

"And if I don't? Are you really going to shoot me? Somehow, I can't see you taking a life."

So much for my bluff. "I don't have to kill you. A bolt through the thigh would be sufficient. And I still have the enchantment to paralyze you. If you'd prefer, we can wait here for Ranulf's return, but this time you'll be the one tied up."

It was probably the course I should have taken when I first immobilized him. But I wanted him gone from the forest. If I waited for

Ranulf to return, we'd still be in the same situation. Ranulf would either have to kill the hunter in cold blood, or make him leave the forest. I refused to put him in the position of making that decision. The guilt would destroy him if he killed; the doubt would eat at him if he opted for mercy.

No, this entire situation was my fault, and I had to take responsibility. If I hadn't wanted to see Ranulf transform . . . if I hadn't led Gideon to the clearing . . . this was my mess, and I had to clean it up myself.

Whatever Gideon saw in my expression now, he no longer thought I was bluffing. He began to walk, but not toward the path to the village.

"Where are you going?"

"To get my pack." He lifted a bag from the ground, shaking it at me.

He must have returned to the cottage while I was unconscious and grabbed his bag. It was nearly empty. No doubt the rope and nets strung up in the clearing had made up the bulk of his supplies. He must have always planned to lay a trap for the dragon once he discovered its lair. It explained how he thought he could bring down such a giant beast with only a crossbow and sword.

I worried about what his trap might do to Ranulf, but I had to get the hunter away before I could focus on that danger. "Fine, you have your pack, now walk."

I followed Gideon down the path toward Wulfkin, the crossbow growing heavier with every step. For nearly an hour, I followed him, slowly letting myself fall farther and farther behind. I had lowered the bow after the first ten minutes, only jerking it back up if Gideon slowed or looked back at me. He didn't stop walking, and eventually I had to admit that I couldn't follow him the whole way to the village.

I might already have taken too long, leaving Ranulf to fly into the trap in the clearing. I slowed further, but Gideon hadn't looked back for a while. How far might he go before realizing I no longer followed him? Far enough, I hoped. I was probably making another mistake. Who knew what he'd do now? But I at least had his crossbow. With only a sword, he'd have to get close to attack anyone, and a dragon could surely protect himself from such a threat. If that dragon wasn't caught in a net.

I walked backwards for another quarter hour, straining to hear if he turned around and tried to sneak up on me. Finally, crossbow still ready in my hands, I turned around and hurried back to the clearing. I wanted to take down the ropes and nets before Ranulf returned.

It must have been past midnight by the time I reached the clearing. I was hungry, exhausted, and my head still pounded from the blow Gideon had used to knock me unconscious. Still, I wouldn't rest until I pulled down every last bit of rope. It took a while, because I refused to set the crossbow down as I worked. I had the nets half down when I felt a gust of wind from above.

I looked up and saw Ranulf coming in to land. He spotted me, and I gestured frantically for him to land in the other half of the clearing.

Fourteen
Ranulf

I was beyond tired. A fever had broken out in Ortfel, hitting just after Grandmother left and sweeping through the village with a rare intensity. The villagers had relied on the medicines Grandmother had supplied them with during her recent visit, but within hours, the sickness had infected dozens of children. Including the infant Grandmother had just delivered.

Fevers were tricky. Even with my body-reading magic to identify the exact problem, it was hard to target the healing power to eradicate the illness. Letting the magic heal on a large scale, diminishing the worst of the symptoms, tended to work the best. With so many patients, and out of the range of the node, Grandmother could only do so much. She had sent me flying back to the edge of node lands to create as many enchantments as I could to deal with the most serious symptoms of the illness.

It took hours to stabilize everybody. Grandmother had accepted a bed with one of the villagers, but I didn't want to stay, trapped in my dragon form. I flew home.

I was ready to drop to the ground when I reached the clearing near the cottage. Because of the darkness, it took until I was just above the trees before I spotted Scarlette. She was attempting to pull a rope from a tree. She looked up and began waving me away.

Was that a crossbow in her hands?

I followed her gestures and hovered over the far side of the clearing, shifting as my feet hit the ground. "What happened?"

"The hunter," she said with such venom that I wondered for a moment if I was even talking to Scarlette. She left the rope I could no longer make out in the darkness and crossed the clearing. That was definitely a crossbow in her hands. "He saw you transform and decided to set a trap for your return."

I suddenly felt vulnerable standing out in the open, naked. I wasn't sure if it was the hunter who worried me, or an armed and angry Scarlette. On second thought, Scarlette was scarier without question. I made my way to the tree hiding my clothes. "Where is he now?"

"Hopefully on his way to Wulfkin. I wasn't sure what else to do except make him leave. Though I guess if he does leave, he could spread word about your shape-shifting, and that's supposed to be a secret. This is all my fault."

Scarlette no longer sounded angry. She sounded defeated. I finished pulling on my pants and made my way back to her, not bothering with my shirt. I pulled the crossbow out of her loose grip and tucked her close to my body. "It isn't your fault. He isn't the first to see something he shouldn't over the years. If he spreads the word and people come sniffing around, I'll be extra careful for a while and let the villagers explain the tales away as drunken ramblings."

Her arms wrapped around me, and she pressed her cheek against my chest. "He's not going to give up. He saw you transform and immediately hatched a plan to use me as bait to trap you. He still wants to kill the dragon, even knowing the truth."

"He planned to use you as bait?" I pulled back enough to look her in the eyes. "What happened, Scarlette?"

"He knocked me out, tied me up, and strung up a bunch of nets." She gestured at the side of the clearing she had been in when I landed. "I got free, paralyzed him with the enchantment you gave me, and took his crossbow. I stupidly didn't take the sword before he recovered, and couldn't bring myself to shoot him. So, I told him to start walking and followed him part of the way toward Wulfkin."

Scarlette's dry recital of events didn't fool me. She wasn't as calm as she was pretending. I could feel her shaking against me. I lifted my hand and laid it against her temple. An echo of her pain pulsed through my head as my innate magic took stock of her injury. Nothing serious. I sent a swell of node power through her anyway, wiping out the lingering ache from the blow.

She sighed and burrowed deeper into me.

"Come on," I whispered. "We've both had a busy night. Let's get to bed."

“What if Gideon comes back? He probably noticed that I stopped following him. There’s no reason for him to go all the way to Wulfkin then.”

“He wants a dragon. I won’t give him one. Since he can’t shoot me in the back without losing his chance at getting a dragon, we are safe enough. On node lands, a hunter is no match for me.”

“He can’t shoot you now, anyway,” Scarlette said, pulling back with a hint of a smile. “I took his crossbow.”

I lifted the weapon. “So you did.”

We walked back to the cottage, our steps slow as exhaustion tugged at us both. I fought to keep my mind clear as I thought over everything Scarlette had told me. I hadn’t lied that Gideon wasn’t the first person to see a transformation. According to the family journals, it happened at least once every generation. A visitor in Wulfkin had seen me shift years ago—it stood to reason that I’d attract more attention than the rest of my family since I shifted into a dragon.

That visitor hadn’t been much of a problem. She had been gathering mushrooms in the forest, and the villagers had convinced her that she had eaten the wrong mushrooms and hallucinated the whole thing. Such a tactic wouldn’t work on Gideon. Scarlette was right to say he wouldn’t give up, but I didn’t think he’d spread the word. Not if he was still intent on killing a dragon himself.

I could handle myself around the hunter, but Scarlette didn’t have the same protections the node granted me. Gideon had already figured out that she was the perfect bait to trap me. The longer Scarlette stayed in the forest, the greater the risk to her.

I needed to finish the charm and get her home.

This time I woke when Scarlette did. She had gone up to the attic with me without comment, the distance that had come between us that morning no longer in evidence. We had fallen into bed with her still in her shift and me in my trousers, but our bodies entwined.

I tightened my arm around her waist when she tried to slip out of bed. “Good morning.”

She twisted to face me, her smile hesitant. “Good morning.”

I kissed her, needing one last taste. This time, I wasn’t going to sit back and watch someone I cared about walk away. This time I would send her away myself. For her own safety, I had to.

Cared about. As if those words truly encompassed what I felt for Scarlette. But I couldn’t think of it in any other terms, not if I wanted to get through this.

I held her close, not wanting the moment to end, but knowing it had to. “I’ll finish the charm for your mother today. Then I think it would be best if I flew you home. Or at least close. I don’t want to risk you running into Gideon on your way.”

She went stiff in my arms. “I’ll be careful. You shouldn’t fly away from the forest. It’s not safe.”

I let her get up, knowing that I had held her for the last time, but wishing I could have had a few more minutes at least.

“We’ll be so high up that it is safe enough. I’ll set you down somewhere isolated.”

Scarlette pulled on her clothes. “It is safer if you don’t even shift. Not with Gideon still hunting you.”

I rolled out of bed and found a clean shirt to pull on. “Gideon has already proven he’ll use you against me. You can’t risk walking into Wulfkin—or running into him anywhere in the forest.”

Scarlette shrugged and went over to the trapdoor.

I rushed over. “Let me go first.”

A furrow formed between her brows as she stepped back and let me go downstairs.

The cottage was empty. Scarlette followed me into the main room and went to the kitchen. I moved to the sitting area, wanting to add as much power as I could to the charm before I had to fly Scarlette home.

The glass cube still sat on the small table, but the ruby wasn’t next to it. I opened the drawer, but it wasn’t in there, either. I crouched low, checking the floor. “Scarlette?”

“Yes?”

“Did you move the ruby charm?”

She came over to where I still crouched on the floor, patting around as if my hand could find what my eyes hadn't. "No. It was still on the table when I left the cottage yesterday evening."

Still on the table. The summons crystal had interrupted my conversation with Scarlette, and in my rush, I had left the ruby out on the table, in plain view.

I looked up and met her eyes. We spoke at the same time. "Gideon."

I jumped to my feet. "I need to find him. Without that ruby, I can't make a charm even as close to as powerful as you need. Even if I had the time."

Scarlette stopped me from running out of the cottage with a single hand on my arm. "How will you find him?"

"I'll go to the village. Even if he doesn't plan to give up, he'll need supplies. If he went all the way last night, I can get there before he wakes up. If he slept in the forest, then I'll be there when he arrives this morning."

"I thought you can't shift once away from the node. You can't confront him in dragon form."

"I'll be fine. And the villagers will help."

"They won't know what is going on." Scarlette propped her hands on her hips. "This is my fault, anyway. I'll go with you."

I ignored the nonsense comment about it being her fault. Gideon was the only one to blame for his own actions. "I don't want you anywhere near him, Scarlette."

"Too bad. You need my help." She hesitated. "I'll bring the crossbow."

I sighed. "There's a walking staff in Grandmother's room. Grab that while I write a message to send to Ortfel. I'll enchant the staff with the same spell I gave you before. That way, you'll have better reach."

Scarlette rushed over to Grandmother's room. I found a sheet of paper and wrote a quick message explaining what was going on. Someone in Wulfkin could ride up to the other village and explain that I wouldn't be coming to give Grandmother a ride home until tomorrow.

I told Scarlette to eat something while I enchanted the staff. Then I took the time to layer the magic carefully, with enough power to last for an hour of constant use. I considered the best trigger and decided to add a verbal command.

I handed Scarlette the staff, and she handed me a peeled egg and hunk of cheese. I ate as we walked to the clearing. "The knob at the top of the

staff has to be touching your target." I checked to make sure she wasn't touching that part of the staff. "You can activate the enchantment by saying 'freeze.' Saying 'unfreeze' stops the magic from flowing."

"How long will a person remain paralyzed if I tap them with the staff?"

"About five minutes." I stopped at the hollowed-out tree. "When we get to the village, don't go far from my side. Tell either the innkeeper or Thalia, a shopkeeper in the blue building on the west side of town, what has happened. They'll know who else to involve."

I added another set of clothes to the pieces I hadn't claimed yesterday and explained to Scarlette the best way to fly dragon-back. When I stepped into the clearing, I could see the remnants of the nets she had pulled down the night before, a few stray bits of rope still attached to the trees, but most on the ground in a pile.

I shifted, and Scarlette rushed over to my foreleg. She put out a hand, but didn't climb up immediately, instead stroking over my scales in wonderment. I didn't know if a real dragon's scales were sensitive, but I felt the pressure of her hand the same as if she were touching skin. A rumble echoed through the clearing as I discovered I could purr.

Scarlette laughed, not scared by the sound in the least, and climbed onto my back. It took her a bit with the staff getting in the way, but eventually she called out that she was ready. I took off carefully, but she was secure, her laughter echoing around me.

I flew low over the trees, just to the west of the river, watching the ground for any sign of the hunter. I saw nothing but normal creatures of the forest the entire way.

I landed outside of the village in the same spot I used when I brought Grandmother.

"Are you going to let me down?" Scarlette called out when I remained standing at my full height instead of kneeling.

I shook my head. Word would spread through the village quickly enough about my presence. Scarlette could stay mounted until I saw one of the Weslets or Thalia. I didn't want to chance Gideon being the first person to arrive.

"Ranulf!"

I spotted Hilde Weslet hurrying down the main street in the village. I lowered myself to the ground and made a step for Scarlette with my leg.

She scrambled down and rushed over to Mistress Weslet. She ignored the wide-eyed look the innkeeper gave her. “Did the huntsman return to the village last night?”

“More like this morning.” Mistress Weslet looked at me, then back at Scarlette. “He pounded on the door in the wee hours demanding a room. What happened?”

“He saw Ranulf transform. He wanted to set a trap, but I got ahold of his crossbow and demanded he leave instead. Only we discovered he stole the charm Ranulf was making for me. There isn’t time to replace it.”

The innkeeper crossed her arms and gave me a considering look. “A gemstone?”

I nodded.

“It’s a ruby,” Scarlette added.

“I’ll force Aaron out of bed,” Mistress Weslet told us. “Scarlette, you come with me.”

I shook my head and blew a puff of smoke at the innkeeper. Aaron was the closest thing Wulfkin had to a constable, but even with him around, I didn’t want Scarlette out of my sight.

The women waved their arms through the air, trying to banish the smoke. Mistress Weslet coughed. “Fine, Scarlette can stay here, but you realize everyone is going to come to see why you landed at the edge of the village, right?”

I nodded. I wasn’t worried about the villagers’ curiosity. Not when they wouldn’t expect me to answer their incessant questions. I’d rather Scarlette face that than the hunter.

The children descended on us within minutes of Mistress Weslet setting off to find Aaron—whoever that was. Ranulf had lowered himself completely to the ground, his head resting on one front leg. He didn’t seem to mind when the children climbed on him or chased his tail, which he twitched back and forth.

I watched in bemusement. Either he didn’t mind children, or people didn’t make him grumpy so long as they didn’t talk to him.

“Didja fly on the dragon?” one little boy asked me.

“I did.”

“I wanna fly, but Mama says it’s too dangerous. She says I shouldn’t bother the healers ‘cuz they have more important things to do. But you got to fly!”

“I did, but only because it was an emergency.” I remembered the paper in my pocket. Mistress Weslet had told me any of the children would know how to get it to the other village. “Tell me, do you know the fastest person for delivering a message to Ortfel?”

A little girl, maybe two years older than the boy, rushed over. “I do! I do! Peter is the fastest. He’s got a special horse that can run super fast.”

“Could you find Peter for me? We need to send a message to Grandmother Molle, and she is in Ortfel today.”

“I’ll find Peter,” the first boy announced, glaring at the girl. He ran off, and she rolled her eyes.

Peter turned out to be a lanky youth, about fifteen years old. He assured me he’d deliver the message before the morning was over. Ranulf didn’t object, so I handed the paper over.

I watched the children play for a little longer, the girl who had told me about Peter still at my side. “Where are all the adults?” I asked her.

“They went to the inn. They’re having a meeting.” She looked in the direction of the inn. “Oh, I think they’re done!”

Ranulf blew another puff of smoke. The children still climbing on him all scrambled down, and he rose to his feet.

Mistress Weslet walked down the street. She stopped in front of me and held out the familiar ruby, with its distinctive cube cut. “Gideon has been charged with theft.” She handed me a purse. “This is the fine Aaron collected on your behalf. The thief is to be banished from the village.”

She turned and addressed Ranulf. “We told him he wasn’t welcome in the forest, but we can’t do much beyond refusing to allow him in Wulfkin.”

Dragon shoulders moved in a clear shrug.

“Be careful,” the innkeeper added. “He is angry.”

Ranulf shrugged once more.

“Aaron is holding him for the next few minutes, then he and a few others plan to escort him at least part way out of the forest. You’ll have a few hours of safety at least. Be careful, though.”

“We will,” I told Mistress Weslet.

I dropped the ruby into the purse, and nearly dropped it when I saw that the heavy weight was made up almost entirely of silver. Gideon would be well beyond angry at this point. He had failed to kill a dragon, lost his crossbow, and now had paid the very man he wanted to kill a small fortune.

I tied the purse closed and slipped it into my pocket. “Thank you for all your help, Mistress Weslet.”

“Thank you for protecting the forest’s secrets, Scarlette. You are welcome in Wulfkin anytime.”

I hugged the other woman and tried not to let the tears fall. I would miss more than just Ranulf when I returned to my normal life.

I climbed back on the dragon’s back and gripped the ridge of scales in front of me. Ranulf took off, and it was as amazing the second time as the first. I could understand why he had never given up shifting into dragon form. Flying was indescribable.

We returned to the cottage, and I gave Ranulf the purse. “I’ll make something to eat.”

Ranulf fished the ruby out of the bag and handed it back to me. “This is yours. I’ll work on the charm today, then we can fly out early this evening. It will be safer to land under the cover of darkness.”

I stood with my arm still outstretched, the purse of silver in my palm. “You can’t mean to give this to me. It is yours.”

“He stole your charm, therefore the fine should go to you.”

“He stole from you, and I can’t even afford the charm in the first place. This could pay for the ruby.”

“I’m not taking the silver, Scarlette, so give up arguing.”

Fine, I wouldn’t argue. Neither would I take the purse home with me.

We stopped just out of view of the clearing as if we had planned it out ahead of time. The sun had already dipped below the tree-line in the west and it was time for me to fly home. Ranulf insisted it wasn’t safe for me to walk and wouldn’t listen to my arguments that it wasn’t safe for him to fly so far from the forest.

Eventually, he had told me that he would carry me in his talons if I didn't cooperate, and wouldn't I rather ride on his back?

We faced each other now in silence. Apart from that argument, we had barely spoken all day. Ranulf had been too busy finishing the charm. Even during supper, the conversation had been limited to me telling him how to find my village.

This was it. This was goodbye. I drank in the sight of him, building a memory that would have to last a lifetime. It was on the tip of my tongue to ask if I'd be welcomed back at the cottage if I ever returned, but I swallowed the words. It was unfair to ask. Ranulf had made it clear that he didn't expect to see me again.

And why should he want me around? We had known each other for such a short time. Even if I felt like I had known him forever, he was unlikely to feel the same. And why should he? I had disrupted his life and caused the hunter to discover his secret. A blackberry pie or two didn't make up for that.

I wondered what words he fought back as we stared at each other. Then he lunged forward and wrapped me in his arms, his mouth firm against mine. I opened to him, running my hands up the muscles of his back as my tongue danced with his.

The kiss felt like a declaration, but that was probably the hopeless optimist in me. A physical attraction didn't have to mean anything else. At least I knew that undeniable pull existed for us both. Even if the kiss was one thing, and one thing only. A farewell.

Ranulf lifted his head. "May the gods and goddesses grant you every joy you so richly deserve, Scarlette."

Not even Affenala could answer such a prayer. He was the only joy I wanted.

"May the gods protect you and grant you the peace you desire." I let my arms fall to my sides and stepped back. "Thank you for everything, Ranulf."

Fifteen
Ranulf

Every beat of my wings was a fight. It wasn't physical exhaustion trying to drag me down, but the invisible pull I felt for the woman I had left in a field far below. That pull was stronger than gravity, but my wings could overcome this, too. They had to.

She would be safe now. Knowing that was the only reason I could fly away.

I almost asked her to stay in that moment when we faced each other before going into the clearing. I had kissed her to stop the words from tumbling out, knowing that I couldn't be so selfish. Even ignoring the charm her mother needed, there were too many reasons for me not to ask.

Scarlette deserved a life of laughter. She deserved the freedom to explore the world, not be tied to a node in the forest far from civilization. She'd find a man who knew how to smile and build a life full of laughter, adventure, and joy with him.

I had almost decided Grandmother was right and she might not need—or even want—adventure. In which case, perhaps I could be the man who brought her joy, for though smiling and laughing didn't come naturally to me, with Scarlette I understood happiness. But experience had taught me caution. Better to send her away now than to wait for her to leave on her own later. The pain would only be worse then.

Even as I had teetered on the edge of taking the risk anyway, I had remembered the huntsman. Gideon wouldn't give up. If Scarlette stayed in the forest, she'd become a target, a weapon to be used against me. I didn't fear for myself, but I would not put her at risk.

So, I didn't ask her to stay. I flew her out of the forest and left her to build a life I could never share.

I had a hunter to thwart, villagers to heal, and charms to make. I had a home and a life that had kept me satisfied for years. It didn't matter that I had left my heart back in that field with Scarlette; I hadn't been using it before she appeared on my doorstep either.

Sixteen

Scarlette

I watched my mother putter around the kitchen and tried to smile. I didn't want her to worry about me. She had gone through enough already. She deserved to enjoy the way the ruby charm had made an immediate difference, giving her a level of energy I hadn't seen for years. I was happy for her, and relieved that she was doing better than she ever had after a healing session, even.

But I couldn't summon a smile. When I caught a glimpse of the ruby, my thoughts weren't on how it had saved my mother, but the man who had made it.

"You don't have to go back to the tavern." Mama handed me a mug of tea. "That bastard will make you beg for your job back, as if he hasn't been scrambling to keep everything running while you were gone. You deserve better than putting up with him."

I blew on the steaming tea, my thoughts scrambling to make sense of my mother's words. The tavern. Go back. Oh. She thought my mood had to do with the thought of returning to work. I imagined tying an apron around my waist and walking back into the tavern. My face ached at the mere thought of the smiles I'd have to force to get through an evening there. I had never enjoyed my job, but it hadn't filled me with the same sense of dread before. It simply was, and I made do. "What else am I supposed to do for a job?"

"You don't need one, not with that purse you brought home."

I scowled. After dropping me off in a field an hour's walk north of my village, Ranulf had tossed the purse full of silver at my feet. The purse I had hidden under his pillow before we left the cottage. Then he blew a bit of smoke in my face when I demanded he take it back and took off. I couldn't

bring myself to leave it in the field, but that didn't mean I wanted to live off those coins.

"It won't last forever," I told my mother, who couldn't understand my reluctance to touch the silver.

"No, but it will last long enough. Or you could use it to make a fresh start. Open your own tavern, maybe."

"Graenod is barely large enough for one tavern and the inn. A second tavern would never work."

"Not here."

I set my mug down. "Where exactly are you expecting me to open this tavern?"

"What about that village in the forest you were telling me about? Didn't you say the inn served as the tavern, too? So, they could use it."

My eyes narrowed. "It's more like the tavern doubles as an inn when needed. They aren't so crowded that they need another establishment."

"What about a bakery?" My mother said quickly, her voice suspiciously cheerful. "You always loved to bake."

The words were enough to make me remember the scent of yeast, the nutty freshness of a loaf just pulled from the fire. The look on Ranulf's face as he took a bite. The same look, only amplified, as our bodies moved together in bed. My cheeks heated, and I realized I might never be able to bake again—not without stirring up memories best left alone. I had to find a way to distance myself from them if I wanted to live my life as anything but a shadow.

Baking was not an option. Which my mother should have realized even without knowing the thoughts swirling through my mind. The bakery in Graenod was run by a sprawling family that had no need for outside help. Then I realized that she hadn't meant working in a bakery here.

"Mama." I cocked my head to the side. "What are you doing? Why are you trying to make me leave?"

Her overly bright expression faded. "You've done so much for me, Scarlette. The least I can do is not sentence you to a lifetime of misery in return."

"What are you talking about?"

"You've hardly smiled since your return. Did you know that?"

"I'm just tired," I protested, knowing she wouldn't believe me. If she had noticed more than my despondency this morning, then I hadn't done as

good of a job hiding my mood as I had thought.

"Sweetie, you have always smiled through everything life throws at you. Even when you worked yourself into exhaustion trying to raise money for a healer—not to mention dealing with fear for my health on top of it—you still smiled." She rose and walked around the table, bending over to hug me. "You are in love with that healer, aren't you? And don't even think of lying to your own mother. I saw your expression when you talked about him."

I tried to smile, but my lips trembled. "It doesn't matter. He has his own life in the forest."

"You had to bring me the charm, but there is nothing forcing you to stay here, Scarlette. You can make a life for yourself in Drakona, too."

"I already showed up at his doorstep uninvited twice. I can't just go and tell him I've abandoned my whole life for him. He didn't ask me to stay or come back, Mama."

"Think about it," Mama said, giving me one last squeeze. "Take a few days. Don't go back to the tavern, just think about what you want to do with your life. It is time for you to put yourself first, sweetie."

I nodded, not quite agreeing, but not arguing, either. I wasn't sure I knew how to put myself first. My whole life I had always worried about how I could help other people. I wanted everyone around me to be happy. The last few years as Mama's health had declined, it had only become more important that I focus on how I could be helpful.

My mother placed her mug in the sink and walked out the door, leaving me to my thoughts.

Instead of thinking about what made me happy, I thought about who I wanted to help. My mother was at the top of the list, but the ruby charm had done more than I had ever hoped. It would last decades, and already had her acting like the woman I had known as a girl. The tumor must have started affecting her long before we realized. She had tired quicker, and headaches kept her in bed or caused foul moods, but the progression happened slowly enough that I hadn't recognized anything was wrong until it was nearly too late. Only now, seeing her completely healthy once more, did I realize how long the illness had diminished my mother, robbing her of the vitality that had been the cornerstone of my early life.

She didn't need my help anymore.

I listed villagers in my head. There were plenty I liked, but it was a superficial relationship. Smiles and jokes shared on market day, nothing more. I might use some of the silver to repay them for the help they had given the second time Mama needed a healing, but I didn't feel the urge to do more for them. They had their own lives, and they had welcomed me into them only so far. I was the friendly woman everyone said hello to and nothing more. I had never had the time to develop deeper relationships.

There were also plenty of villagers I would be just as happy to never see again—most of them the regular patrons at the tavern.

Rosalia. If I ever saw the traveling healer again, I wanted to do something to thank her for everything. I had spent less than a day in her company, but I felt closer to her than most of the villagers. There had been a spark of recognition between us, the sense that we could be friends if life gave us the opportunity. But Rosalia's feet itched to roam the kingdom, sharing her healing power with all she found. I'd never be happy with such a nomadic existence.

I wanted a home.

And Mama was right: this village didn't feel like my home.

The people of Wulfkin ran through my memory. Their warm welcome and determination to protect their healers. The laughing children who didn't know hunger, who could play on a dragon without fear and accept the end of playtime with smiles still wreathing their faces.

Grandmother Molle, who had welcomed me without hesitation.

Ranulf.

I closed my eyes. I wanted to make Ranulf laugh. Seeing his lips twitch when he was amused—but refused to admit it—gave me joy. Listening to him talk, the words all the more powerful after his stubborn silences, sent a shiver down my spine.

I wanted to build a life with him, but I could accept the disappointment of him not wanting the same so long as I knew he was safe and happy.

I had no such assurances.

"He was happy with me," I whispered. I tilted my chin up. I would not doubt myself or what we had shared. Ranulf might not have been able to accept that happiness, but he had felt it. Perhaps it wouldn't last beyond the strange week where we had been forced together, but it was just as likely to last the rest of our lives. If we let it.

If not for the threat posed by the huntsman, would Ranulf have tried?

My chin dipped once more. A dragon hunter was after the man I loved and I could do nothing to help. I wouldn't even know if anything happened.

In the end, it was the uncertainty that had me packing my bag once more. I couldn't sleep at night, worrying about what the huntsman was doing. When I managed to fall asleep, I'd jerk awake covered in sweat only a few hours later, terrified that Gideon had killed Ranulf.

I told my mother that I hadn't made a firm decision, that I was returning to Drakona Forest in order to decide. She responded that she would come to visit as soon as I was settled.

I had everything ready and was only waiting for my mother to return from the market, because she insisted on buying me a few extra supplies, when there was a knock on the door. I opened it, unsure who to expect.

When I had first seen Ranulf, I was shocked to learn he and Rosalia were twins. Apart from the black hair, there was little resemblance. She was petite, with a wide smile and eyes of a darker green. Seeing her on my doorstep now, I saw the similarities I had missed before. It was in the shape of their eyes, the stubborn tilt of a chin.

"Rosalia." I stepped back, letting her walk inside.

"You're back already!" She spotted the pack waiting for me on the table. "Or did you not even leave yet? I came to make sure the charm I gave your mother was holding up, but if you haven't even left for the forest, she'll need at least another two weeks. A charm with the power of a node behind it will make a big difference, Scarlette. I know you are reluctant to ask for what you see as charity, but Grandmother won't see it that way."

"I got the charm. I left hours after your last visit." I crossed my arms. "You could have warned me about your twin."

Rosalia let out a noisy breath, her lips vibrating. "Bah. I didn't want to scare you off. And he avoids people as much as possible, so I didn't expect you to even talk to him."

"He was the only one home when I reached the cottage," I said dryly.

"Oh. Sorry."

My lips twitched. "We figured out how to get along, eventually."

Rosalia's eyes went wide. "You and Ranulf?"

"I didn't say—"

"Oh, I can imagine it now. He wouldn't have had any idea how to deal with you. It's perfect. Is that why you are packed for another trip? Are you going back to Drakona?"

"Yes, but it's not what you think," I told her before she could jump to anymore conclusions. "I want to make sure he is safe. There's a hunter."

As quickly as possible, I explained the situation with Gideon. "So, I'm not sure what I can do, but I feel guilty. If I hadn't snuck off to watch Ranulf transform, the huntsman never would have learned who the dragon is. He would have followed the trail to the mountains and left Ranulf alone."

Rosalia drummed her fingers against the table where we had settled about halfway into my story. "You are right. Something will have to be done about the hunter. He won't give up, and the villagers can only do so much. I'll go with you to Drakona. I'm sure we can think of a way to deal with him if we all work together. When did you plan to leave?"

"I was just waiting for Mama to return from the market."

"Alright. I'll run out and buy a few supplies right now. I'll be back within the hour, then we can leave."

Rosalia didn't wait for a response, practically running out the door before she finished talking.

Seventeen
Ranulf

I had made more enchantments in the past week than I usually crafted in an entire month. I spent hours carving the discs, shaping the spells, and drawing enough node power to make them last twice as long as usual. The focus required was the only thing keeping me from flying out of the forest to find Scarlette.

It was probably for the best that I had caught hints of Gideon and his traps throughout Drakona. I had decided that it was safest not to transform at all. If I had gone for a flight, I had no doubt my wings would have carried me southeast whether or not I planned it.

At the rate I was going, though, my control would erode enough that I'd probably start walking to her village in my sleep soon. Actually, knowing that going to her as a dragon put her at risk, I was already considering making the journey on foot. If it weren't for the danger she'd be in from Gideon, I'd have already left and begged her to come back to the forest with me.

Why had I thought it might be easier if I sent her away before she decided to leave on her own? Even if she couldn't settle into a life here, wouldn't it have been better to have enjoyed her company for as long as possible?

It didn't help that Grandmother had already informed me I was a fool for letting her leave. Once she realized I had essentially made Scarlette leave, she revised her assessment and insisted I was a complete idiot.

"Anyone home?"

The voice carried up into the attic through the open trapdoor. It was a cheerful voice, one I recognized, and not the one I wanted to hear. I levered myself off the spare bed, now truly covered in wood shavings, and went to the trapdoor. My sister smiled up at me from the bottom of the stairs.

“Is Nana down in Ortfel?”

I accepted the inevitable and walked down the stairs. My relationship with my sister wasn’t as fraught as with my mother. She hadn’t left until we were adults, and I had known it was coming. She was also better about visiting regularly. I reached the bottom of the stairs and crossed my arms. “She’s out picking mushrooms. What are you doing here? I thought you weren’t coming until Harvest Festival.”

“Such a warm welcome. No wonder I wanted to stop by early.” She rolled her eyes. “I heard you were having a little difficulty with a dragon hunter.”

“How did you hear that?”

As far as I could tell, Gideon had left the forest only long enough to buy a new crossbow. I seriously doubted he had told anyone about his discovery.

Rosalia waved her hand through the air. “I have my sources.”

She was hiding something, and I had a sneaking suspicion I knew what. Or rather, who. I wanted to demand information, but I knew better. That would only make my twin more determined not to confirm anything.

I shrugged, trying not to let on how much I was waiting for her next words. “Well, your sources shouldn’t have worried you. The hunter has set a few traps in the clearings, and he’s roaming the forest with a crossbow ready, but he’s not going to catch me.”

“You are very sanguine about being hunted.”

“Like I said, he won’t catch me. I’m not shifting—just to be safe—and so long as he is hunting me, I know he isn’t going after anyone else.”

“Anyone like Scarlette?”

“I knew it.” Now that Rosalia had spoken first, I gave in. Just saying Scarlette’s name would be enough for me to betray my feelings at this point, but I wouldn’t let that stop me. “She is safe? When did you talk to her?”

“I stopped by her village to check on her mother and make sure she had gotten a node charm. Oh, and then I spoke to her this morning when I left Wulfkin to come out to the cottage.”

Everything stilled as I digested the fact that Scarlette was in the forest. I didn’t breathe. I thought my heart even stopped for a moment. Then the world rushed back into motion and my heart beat twice as fast. “She’s here.”

“Well, not here. She’s still in Wulfkin.”

“Why didn’t she come to the cottage with you?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe because you made it clear you like your solitude and never gave her a reason to believe she’d be welcomed if she returned?”

“What?” Did she really believe that I wouldn’t welcome her?

“Come on, Ranulf. You sent her away the first time she knocked on your door.”

“Yes, but I made it plenty clear later that I had realized what a mistake that was. She can’t truly believe I wouldn’t welcome her.”

“She knows better than to think a welcome in your bed is the same as a welcome in your life. Here’s a hint, Ranulf: she wants to be a part of more than your sleeping arrangements. So, if you are only interested in sex, walk away now.”

“I’m not talking about this with my sister.”

“Oh yes, you are. She’s my friend. I don’t want to see her get hurt, and I will be on her side, even though you are my twin.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose. Rosalia wasn’t going to let it go. “I don’t want to see her hurt, either. I’m pretty sure—no, I’m certain—I love her.”

“Then you should probably tell her.”

“I can’t fly to Wulfkin with the hunter around.” I’d take the risk for myself, but I had every intention of bringing Scarlette back to the cottage with me. I would not risk having her on my back now that Gideon once more had a crossbow. “Why did you let her stay in the village?”

Another thought occurred to me. Something I should have realized sooner. “If the huntsman discovers she is in the forest, he’ll go after her. She humiliated him.”

“Calm down. She’s safe in Wulfkin. The villagers will not let the hunter get anywhere near her. She’s a favorite there. I’m pretty sure the Weslets already offered her a job.”

“Rosalia, it is going to take me most of the day to get there walking.”

“Then it is a good thing I borrowed a horse from Thalia. You can return it for me.”

For the first time in over a week, I smiled.

Rosalia flapped her hands at me. “What are you waiting for? Go!”

Even with the horse, it was mid-afternoon by the time I reached Wulfkin. I had only taken the time to shove the pile of charms and enchantments I had made into a bag—pulling out one wooden disc with a crescent moon engraving and slipping it into my pocket first—before leaving the cottage. I rode as quickly as I dared, but the beast couldn't gallop the entire distance.

Once I entered the village, I handed the reins of my mount off to the first child I saw, instructing him to get the horse back to Thalia. She'd find the bag of talismans and take care of them. I patted the disc in my pocket and went to the inn.

My eyes had to adjust to the relative dimness in the common room, but when they did, I found Scarlette immediately. She wore a white apron over her skirt and had a mug in her hand. She laughed with Aaron at the corner table and handed him the mug. It was too early in the day for him to be here, and I realized Rosalia was right. The villagers wouldn't let anything happen to Scarlette.

She didn't see me, but Mistress Weslet did. She waved me over.

"She's not going to accept my job offer, is she?" The innkeeper complained when I reached her.

I shrugged. "That's up to her. Once the hunter is dealt with, I can fly her down here easily enough. But I'm afraid you will have to make do without her for the rest of today. If she is working to pay for a room, I'll cover it."

"She's working to keep from fretting about you. You'd better not hurt that girl, Ranulf."

"I've already had the lecture from my grandmother. And sister." I wanted to be mad. My personal life was none of her business. But I couldn't summon even a speck of anger, not when her concern was all for Scarlette.

"Good. Just remember that the hunter will be the least of your problems if you screw up this second chance."

"Then you don't think I've already messed up beyond forgiveness?"

"I think that girl would be willing to forgive you just about anything, which is why the rest of us are determined to watch out for her."

"I wanted her safe and happy."

“Then keep her safe and make her happy yourself. Now, go. Aaron can’t keep her distracted much longer.”

The innkeeper was right. Though the man was clearly trying to tell an engrossing story, Scarlette glanced around the room. She spotted me, and her lips parted.

We met in the middle of the room, and I didn’t care who was watching. I kissed her.

“Ranulf,” she moaned against my lips.

Our audience became an inconvenience. I grabbed her hand and led her to the back stairs. I dropped the apron I had unknotted during our kiss on a chair as we passed.

“Ranulf!” This time she said my name with a mixture of shock and embarrassment.

“Mistress Weslet said she doesn’t need you the rest of today.” We reached the top of the stairs. “Which is your room? We need to talk in private.”

She pointed at the second door and pulled a brass key from her pocket. “Just talk?”

I ran my knuckles down her cheek and jaw. “I hope not, but talk first.”

The room was small, little more than a bed with a wooden chest at the foot. There was a window letting in a breeze, a small fireplace—currently cold—and a table with a washbasin and oil lamp. No chairs.

Scarlette hesitantly sat on the bed, and I decided that joining her wasn’t wise. Not if I planned to stick with my decision to talk first.

I planted myself in front of the window. I couldn’t even pace without tripping over her feet. How to start? “How is your mother?”

I wanted to slap myself. That was not how I wanted to start this conversation. Maybe I should have stuck with kissing her. That got the point across rather well, after all.

Scarlette’s hands burrowed into her skirt. “She’s doing wonderful. The charm made her improve so much we realized just how bad things had gotten. I haven’t seen her so full of energy since I was a girl.”

I ran a hand through my hair. “I’m no good at this.”

A wisp of a smile played over Scarlette’s lips. “What? Talking?”

“Exactly. I don’t even know where to start. I don’t want to mess this up, Scarlette.”

“Maybe you could start by telling me what, exactly, you don’t want to mess up?”

I gestured between us. “This. Whatever this is after I already messed up because I didn’t ask you to stay.”

“You wanted me to stay?”

“Want,” I corrected.

“Then why did you insist on taking me home?”

I ticked the reasons off on my fingers. “Your mother. My mother. My sister. Gideon.”

“My mother is now fine. We’re going to take care of Gideon together, and then he won’t be a threat to either of us. But what do your mother and sister have to do with it?”

“I’m the odd one out. I enjoy my solitude and living far from everyone. Mother and Rosalia couldn’t get away fast enough. They felt stifled out in the cottage. Even Grandmother spends days at a time in Ortfel more often than not. How could you be happy living in isolation with only me as company? You deserve a life full of people and laughter.”

“Only you?” she repeated incredulously. “Do you really think you aren’t enough? What do I care for being surrounded by people if none of them are the man I love?”

“You love me.” The words were half a plea, half a question.

“So much. I didn’t want to force myself on you, but leaving was the hardest thing I’ve ever done. I want to stay with you, Ranulf. Nowhere else will ever feel like home.”

It only took a single step for me to stand in front of her. “Are you certain? I don’t want you to ever feel trapped.”

“I don’t see the cottage as trap. It is a haven.” She smiled, a hint of playfulness peeking through. “Besides, I’ll have my very own dragon to carry me whenever I want to visit Wulfkin.”

I sighed, trying to sound long-suffering, but in truth it was relief. “I already told Hilde I can fly you down if you wanted to accept her job offer.”

Scarlette’s lips parted. Then she surged up from the bed, wrapping her arms around me. “You’d do that?”

“Scarlette, I’d do anything for you.” I tucked her closer against me. “I love you. I lived my life in a fog, not knowing what I was missing until you came and cut through the gloom with your brightness. If carrying you to

Wulfkin every day was what it took to keep you happy and with me, then I wouldn't hesitate."

She looked up at me, her eyes bright. "I'm not sure I want to spend every evening away from you. But maybe . . . a delivery of bread every other day might be a nice compromise. Master Weslet is an excellent cook, but not the best baker."

"Whatever you want, Scarlette. I'm sure Hilde would be overjoyed to get even a single loaf of your bread each week."

"And maybe . . ." She trailed off, no longer looking at me.

I twisted to catch her gaze once more. "Maybe what?"

She shook her head. "It's not important. We should focus on more critical matters. Like how to handle Gideon."

"What matters to you is important, Scarlette. Gideon can wait." She pressed her lips together, and I couldn't resist leaning down to kiss her, a quick peck before I forced my lips into the semblance of a scowl. "Tell me."

"Well, it's just that Mistress Weslet doesn't truly need my help in the tavern every night, but I'm sure she would appreciate a little extra help, and I think she and my mother would get along well, and Wulfkin is far closer to the cottage than Graenod—"

I cut Scarlette off with another kiss. "Wanting your mother to move here is certainly not nothing. We can talk to Hilde about it in the morning. You can write to your mother, too, and Thalia will get the letter delivered."

Suddenly Scarlette was the one kissing me, her hands fisted in my shirt. Her lips moved from mine to my cheeks, my chin, then the column of my throat. Between each kiss, she spoke. "I. Love. You. How could you think you wouldn't be enough for me? You. Are. Everything."

I pulled her back to my lips, then toppled us both onto the bed. "Only for you, Scarlette. My Scarlette."

My Scarlette.

My hands fumbled with her laces, the need to show her how much I needed her burning through me.

She shimmied out of her skirt and petticoat. "Don't stop talking. I love your words."

For her, I found more words. "You are everything I didn't know I was missing. Everything I need."

Clothes fell to the floor. Somehow, I maintained enough of my wits to pull the enchanted disc from my pocket and activate it, braiding it into

Scarlette's hair with trembling fingers. I moved against her, touching every inch, determined to brand myself into her skin as she was branded into my very soul. "You are the reason for every breath I take."

She moaned and dug her fingers into my back. "Ranulf, I need you."

"You have me, love. I'm yours."

Her hips arched up, and I positioned myself at her entrance. "I love you, Scarlette. As long as the sun and stars shine and fires burn, I'll love you. You are my everything. My always."

I thrust into her as I spoke, claiming her with my body as I gave myself to her with my words. She held me close and met my pace, her eyes locked on mine. "My always," she repeated, shuddering around me as her release washed over her in waves.

I kept moving, drawing out her pleasure as long as I could before succumbing to my own.

We laid together for long moments, out of words. Eventually, I forced myself to get up and dip a cloth in the pitcher of water in the washbasin. I cleaned us both, then slid back into bed next to Scarlette, tucking her against my side and stroking a hand over her hair.

"In case I still haven't made myself clear, I want you to stay at the cottage. With me."

She chuckled. "I was beginning to get that impression, but I appreciate the words."

"If you are ever unsure, I want you to ask me, Scarlette. Or at least remind me to use my words. I've spent too long alone, I'm liable to forget."

"You seem to enjoy talking in bed. I'm sure I can work with that."

I snorted. "Remember, I'm just a man. If you just drag me to bed without explanation, I might not realize there was a reason."

"I was thinking more that we'd establish a positive association. You'll learn that talking means pleasure and give up your broody ways."

"Or I'll become even more taciturn out of the bedroom because it gives me a hard-on."

Her laughter was a balm for my soul. I had done that. I had given her a moment of joy. It was almost more rewarding than bringing her to orgasm. Almost.

"Ranulf?"

"Yes?"

Whatever Scarlette wanted to ask was lost when a burst of blue light filled the room. I slapped a hand over the summons crystal, my other arm tightening around Scarlette so that she wouldn't get up. "Ignore it."

She ignored my words instead. "Is that for here or Ortfel?"

"Ortfel. The Wulfkin summons crystal glows red." Twice in as many weeks. We often went months without the villagers using the summons crystals, even after all of Grandmother's urgings not to hesitate. We supplied them with enough charms and enchantments, and visited often enough that emergencies were few and far between.

"Do you need to do something?"

"What? Even if I could risk flying around as a dragon, we are a couple hour's walk from node lands." I didn't mention that Peter's horse could carry me that same distance in just over a quarter hour. I wasn't the healer villagers wanted in an emergency anyway, since all I could do was bring the same type of charms they already had access to. "They'll be fine. Rosalia is with Grandmother. Between them, they'll take care of whatever the emergency is."

"I forgot Rosalia would share your blood-tie to the node. Can she shift, too?"

"Yes. She'll run most of the way in wolf form. One of the villagers will meet her with a horse and she'll be in Ortfel before I could even shift into a dragon."

The blue light faded, and I moved my hand.

Scarlette relaxed against me once more.

"In fact," I told her, my hand drifting lower. "Since I don't want to risk dragon form with Gideon still out and about, it will take us hours to return to the cottage. We don't want to get stuck walking in the dark, so we really can't leave until tomorrow morning."

"Is that so?"

"Mmhmm."

"Whatever shall we do to pass the time?"

I tugged her on top of me, her thighs straddling my waist. "I can think of a few things."

She pressed her hands against my chest and slid back. "So can I."

Eighteen
Scarlette

Ranulf led me down barely-there paths, pointing out native flora—both those with medicinal properties, and the ones that were simply beautiful—as we went. Ranulf's knowledge of the forest let us take a more direct route, rather than following the river, but we still hadn't reached the cottage by the time the sun reached its zenith.

"Picnic?" Ranulf suggested, pointing to a mossy area a little way off the path.

"That sounds perfect." Master Weslet had shoved a parcel of fruit and cheese at us before we left the inn. We could easily have eaten as we walked, but I was more than happy to enjoy this slice of paradise for a little longer instead.

I settled with my back against a tree. Ranulf handed me an apple, took a bite of a second himself, and stretched out next to me, resting his head in my lap.

"How much farther?" I asked after I had eaten half my apple.

"An hour or so. You don't mind how isolated the cottage is, do you? I know you said—"

I smoothed my hand over his hair. "I love the tranquility of the forest. Now, that's not to say that I might not be interested in visiting the villages a bit more than is your preference, but it doesn't feel isolated so much as . . . insulated."

"Even flying, the trip won't be as pleasant in the middle of winter. We really are more isolated then."

"Well, it's a good thing I'll have a dragon to keep me warm, isn't it?"

The corner of his mouth quirked up. "I can't actually breathe fire, you know. I don't know what organ allows real dragons to do that, but the best I could manage was the ability to blow smoke."

I took a sip of water and passed the flask to him. “It’s just as well I was actually imagining you in human form keeping me warm, then.”

Ranulf pushed himself into a sitting position and drank. Then he stood and offered me a hand. I let him pull me up, stumbling against him when he didn’t let go. He kissed me. “I’d offer to keep you warm right now, but that sort of welcome to the forest should probably wait until there isn’t a hunter lurking around.”

“Let’s get home and make a plan to take care of the hunter, then.”

Ranulf squeezed my hand. “Yes. Let’s go home.”

A STEADY THUNKING sound made me slow as we neared the cottage.

Ranulf laughed. “Rosalia must be annoyed about something.”

I looked at him, and he laughed again, leading me down a path that would take us behind the cottage. When we got closer, I saw what was causing the noise. Rosalia swung an ax with unrestrained fury, chopping wood. Though she didn’t have the same muscle mass as her twin—or even her grandmother—she could split the logs with shocking ease.

“She does this when she gets angry?”

“No, Grandmother makes her do it when she won’t stop complaining.”

Rosalia noticed us and lowered the ax to the ground. “It’s about time you two got back. We need to plan.”

“What happened?” I asked. I had never seen Rosalia like this.

“Ortfel had an emergency yesterday.”

“We saw the summons.” Ranulf began stacking the logs Rosalia had split in a holder by the back of the cottage.

“But do you know what the emergency was?” Rosalia didn’t wait for our answer. “That bastard shot a child. A child! All in hopes of trapping you when you flew down in answer to the summons.”

“He did what?” I pressed a hand against my chest. “Is the child alright? Were you or Grandmother Molle hurt?”

Rosalia kicked one of the logs still by her feet. “I healed the boy. The bolt was in his thigh. Even with a healing charm, he could have bled out if it had hit the artery, but luckily, it wasn’t quite that bad. The idiot hunter

never even saw me. He wasn't watching for a wolf." She tugged her braid over her shoulder. "We need to do something about him before he does any permanent damage."

I stared at the long black braid hanging down to Rosalia's waist. Her hair hadn't been that long the last time I saw her.

"Scarlette?"

I realized the twins were waiting for me to join them. I ignored the mystery of Rosalia's hair and followed them into the cottage.

Grandmother Molle had four mugs of tea ready on the table by the time we entered the room. She sat at the head of the table. Ranulf took the seat at the foot of the table, and Rosalia and I settled into the other chairs across from each other.

"Clearly, ignoring the hunter and not shifting is no longer enough," Ranulf said. "But I'm not sure what else we can do."

"He shot someone," I pointed out. "Shouldn't we inform the constables?"

The three healers all laughed.

"There are no constables in Drakona," Grandmother Molle explained.

"Aaron, up in Wulfkin, is the closest we have." Ranulf added. "He's technically a magistrate, and the most he can do is charge a fine or banish someone from the village. Which he already did."

"But if a more serious crime is committed, can't he contact someone else? Someone with the authority to do more?"

Rosalia shrugged. "He'd have to apply all the way to Haiwella for support. Even if the capital sent a constable or two, it would take forever."

"It would also mean giving Gideon a chance to spread his story." Ranulf frowned. "As it is, he is keeping the secret because it benefits him. If that changed, he wouldn't hesitate to tell everyone that the healers of Drakona can shift into dragons. I'd rather deal with him on our own."

We fell silent. For several minutes, we all stared at our mugs.

"Short of killing him, I just don't know how we can make him stop hunting." Ranulf grumbled. "He isn't going to see reason. Scarlette already proved that."

Rosalia looked thoughtful, and her grandmother shot her a withering look. "We aren't going to kill him. We are healers, children."

"Maybe we can make a deal with him?" I tapped a finger against the handle of my mug. "He must want something besides just killing a dragon."

Ranulf shook his head. “I wouldn’t trust him to uphold his end of the bargain.”

“But we wouldn’t have to trust him.” Rosalia perked up. “If we make him sign a contract, the Duke of Truthhold can make it magically binding. You could fly me over the Gaboor Mountains without drawing attention, then I can walk the rest of the way and deliver it within a couple days.”

The Truthhold family had a blood-lock on another node, one rumored to be the strongest in the entire continent. The magic was tied to truth-telling. Any contract enchanted with the power of the node became more than just legally binding.

“Would that work?” I asked. “Gideon wouldn’t have to go to Truthhold with you?”

“We wouldn’t even have to tell him that we plan to use the node. So long as he signs the contract, and it is legal, the magic will work. I don’t think we even have to share the contents of the contract if we don’t want to, so Ranulf’s ability will stay secret, too.”

“Wait.” I had heard something about the Truthholder node recently. I tried to remember what. “Didn’t the duke close Rose Castle? He hasn’t accepted visitors all summer.”

Rosalia waved her hand through the air. “I heard that, too, but even if the duke doesn’t want visitors, he must still be enchanting contracts. Whatever is going on with him, it shouldn’t impact us.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Ranulf ran a hand over his face, looking suddenly exhausted. “A coerced signature isn’t legal. We’d still have to find a way to convince him to sign.”

I reached under the table and rested my hand on his thigh. He looked at me, a spark of warmth in his eyes. I kept my hand there.

“What does he hope to gain by killing a dragon?” My question earned me everyone’s attention. “He has to have a reason for refusing to walk away. Why is it worth the hassle?”

“Bragging rights,” Ranulf suggested.

“Dragon scales,” his grandmother added. “Dragon scales are like diamonds. Rare, beautiful, and difficult to destroy.”

“So, we offer him scales and the chance to claim he killed a dragon.” I paused and looked at Ranulf. “Do you shed scales?”

“Not usually, but if Rosalia can grow her hair during a shift, I think I can manage to grow a few extra scales.”

I gestured at Rosalia's braid. "That's from shifting?"

She shrugged. "Our magic isn't really healing, but body-changing. My hair was this length for the last year or so that I lived in Drakona. Since I almost never shift away from the node, I naturally try to recreate that familiar state even years later."

"Does that mean you don't age, either?" I looked at Grandmother Molle, who certainly didn't look old enough to have grown grandchildren, but neither did she look young.

She laughed at my scrutiny. "Healing magic does wonders, but it cannot halt the aging process altogether. We age slowly, but we do age."

Ranulf placed his hand over mine on his thigh. "Your mother will get some of the same benefit now that she's wearing a powerful healing charm all the time."

I looked at him and saw the answer to the question I didn't ask. I'd talk to him about my own aging later. For now, we had more important matters to focus on.

"So, we need a collection of scales to offer Gideon and a well-worded contract for him to sign."

Rosalia nodded. "Even if Rose Castle is closed, there must still be a way to enchant contracts. Or I'll wait in the nearest town until the castle opens again. It's still our best option."

I smiled. "Let's do this."

Nineteen
Ranulf

Shedding scales did not come naturally. If Rosalia had known how to transform into a dragon, she would have done it within minutes. She did her best to coach me through how she grew her hair during a shift, but it was difficult for me to do anything but what I had always done.

That was why I could only transform into a dragon. I knew it would work, because it had worked previously. Doing something different caused me to break into a cold sweat, my heart galloping in my chest, as I fought the belief that I'd cause fatal damage rather than transform.

"You must know how to control the length of your hair as part of the shift," she complained on the second day as we returned to the cottage. "You've done it before, because every time I see you, your hair is the same length, and I know you aren't using scissors to trim it."

"Rosalia, I've been transforming into a dragon at least once a week ever since I was a teenager. I'm not changing my hair; I'm keeping it the same."

"What if Scarlette told you she'd like to see you with longer hair? What would you do then?"

I raised a brow. "Really?"

"Scarlette!" Rosalia beckoned her over from where she knelt in the garden.

She and Grandmother had hammered out the language of the contract we'd give Gideon in a single day. They were focusing on the household chores while my twin had me shifting until I grew dizzy. Scarlette wiped the dirt from her hands and came over. "What?"

"Don't you think Ranulf would look good with longer hair?"

She pursed her lips and looked at me with her head angled slightly. "I think you are right. This length is nice, but it would look wonderful longer,

too."

"You want more to run your hands through, huh?" Rosalia nudged Scarlette with her elbow.

She blushed, which was a clear enough answer.

I pivoted.

"Hey, where are you going?" my twin demanded.

"Back to the clearing. Let's try this."

She laughed. "Come on, Scarlette. Ranulf needs your help."

I hurried back to the clearing, listening to my sister explain how I was trying to master growing my hair first, since it was easier to control the transformation back into human form.

I left them at the bend in the path where Rosalia always waited for me, but Scarlette came through the trees a moment later. She waited until I finished stripping, then came up and kissed me, running her fingers through my hair as she did.

"Good luck," she whispered, her eyes sparkling as she tugged on my hair once before stepping back.

I hurried out to the meadow, more interested in getting Scarlette someplace without my sister than running this experiment. Better to do it quickly.

I pulled the node power into my body and let my dragon form explode outward. I turned one eye on Scarlette at the edge of the clearing. She blew me a kiss.

I thought about her hands in my hair and pulled on the magic once more.

Scarlette's grin was huge when she saw me. I took a step and felt hair brush over my ass and the backs of my thighs. I grabbed a fistful and stared in horror. My hair went down to my knees.

Scarlette met me in the middle of the clearing, carrying my clothes. Her voice was full of suppressed laughter. "Pull on your trousers before Rosalia gets too impatient."

I got dressed, fighting my hair every step of the way. "You don't actually like it this long, do you?"

Scarlette's smile grew impossibly wider. "It is rather sexy." She laughed at my expression. "Don't worry, I wasn't actually thinking that long. I'll cut it for you when we get back to the cottage."

We rounded the bend and my twin saw me. She bent in half, laughing uncontrollably.

I walked around her, pulling Scarlette with me.

The next day I transformed into a dragon, scattering emerald scales across the clearing as I did. I still wasn't sure what Rosalia's explanations meant about how to adapt the shift, but I knew that I needed to shed those scales to get rid of Gideon, and I needed to get rid of Gideon to keep Scarlette safe, and that was enough.

My fear of messing up the transformation couldn't compete against the fear of anything happening to her.

When I transformed back into a human afterward, my hair was the same length Scarlette had trimmed it to the night before—a little longer than I was used to, but not too much.

Rosalia and I collected the scales and carried them back to the cottage.

"We need to contact the hunter." I told Grandmother and Scarlette as I let my armful of scales spill onto the table.

Rosalia added the ones she had carried.

"You did it!" Scarlette threw her arms around my neck.

I pulled her closer. For Scarlette, I'd do anything.

"I'll go to Ortfel," Grandmother announced. "If you fly me up, he might come to investigate or to watch for your return. I'll spread the word among the villagers to tell him you want to make a deal. We'll use the summons crystal if he agrees to meet."

"I'll do the same in Wulfkin," Rosalia offered. "I know they banned him from the village, but if he is sniffing around down there, maybe we can pass on the message, anyway."

Scarlette and I enjoyed two days alone in the cottage.

“I love my family,” I murmured, wrapping my arms around her and pulling her back against my chest, “but having the house to ourselves is nice.”

She tilted her head to smile at me. “If you want this pie, you have to let me finish preparing the dough.”

I nipped her ear. “I’d rather have you.”

She wriggled, turning to face me. Flour dusted hands landed on my shoulders.

Bang! Bang!

We jumped, spinning to face the front door.

“Dragon! You wanted to talk? Let’s talk.”

“He was supposed to go to one of the villages,” I grumbled, stepping away from Scarlette. “Stay here. I’ll talk to him outside.”

She shook her head. “I’m not letting you deal with him alone.”

“Dragon!” Gideon’s voice echoed through the cottage.

“He wants a dragon, not a man,” I pointed out to Scarlette. I crossed the room to the door. “I’ll be safe enough, but he’s already proven willing to use you to get at me.”

She huffed and crossed her arms. “Be careful,” she ordered.

I nodded and opened the door. The huntsman stood right there, his fist raised to pound on the door once more. I glared until he lowered his hand, then walked outside, pushing him aside without so much as laying a hand on him. The mighty hunter couldn’t stand his ground.

He covered his retreat with bluster. “I was told you wanted to talk.”

“If you heard that, then you know I have an offer for you.”

“I’m listening.”

I took a closer look at the hunter, surprised by his willingness to talk. He was no longer clean-shaven, there was dirt in his armor, and the crossbow hanging off his shoulder was of noticeably poorer quality. Between the fine lightening his purse and the lack of welcome by any of the residents of Drakona, he had been forced to live rougher.

Gideon had wanted an easy path to fame and fortune. He thought hunting a dragon in the forest simpler than scaling the mountains to get near one. Now he was without resources.

Perfect.

“I will provide you with a dragon scale,” I told the hunter. “In exchange, you will stop hunting me. In fact, you will leave the forest and

never return. You can tell whatever tale you want about how you came by the scale, so long as it doesn't mention me or shape-shifting."

"You can't buy me off with a single dragon scale."

I raised an eyebrow. He wasn't refusing to deal; he was simply greedy. That was expected. I had shed plenty of scales over the past few days. I was ready to haggle. "What do you want, then?"

"A dozen scales every year to maintain your secret."

I shook my head. "Nothing ongoing. Once you leave the forest, you do not come back. A dozen scales total."

"Fifty. And I want my crossbow and silver returned."

"Two dozen. I'll return your crossbow, but I don't have the silver." Nor would I ask Scarlette for the money, though I'm certain she'd offer.

"Then the equivalent in copper or whatever you do have."

I rolled my eyes. "Does it look like I have need of much coin here? I barter with the villages. My coin is healing charms."

"Fine. Fifty scales, my crossbow, and a dozen healing charms."

"Three dozen scales, your crossbow, and five charms. And if you tell a story about defeating a dragon in the forest, the villagers of Wulfkin will corroborate your story—so long as it bears no resemblance to the truth."

"Deal."

"I'll get the contract."

"What?"

"The contract. You didn't think I'd take your word for it, did you? We will sign a contract detailing our agreement." I cocked an eyebrow. "That isn't a problem, is it?"

"Fine. Write your contract, but I want to see the scales."

"Of course. I'll bring everything out."

Gideon scowled, but didn't protest when I left him outside.

Scarlette sat at the table, pen in hand. She looked up at me. "I almost have your terms filled in."

"Thank you. I'll grab everything else."

I ran up to the loft and counted out scales, slipping them into a rough sack. Then I grabbed five of the charms I had been working on to send to Ortfel, tied off the spells, and shoved them in my pocket. It would serve Gideon right if I made him five charms that lasted no longer than an hour after I finished them, but though he hadn't specified the strength of the charms, I would still give him quality spells. No doubt he would sell them,

and I didn't want the people who ended up with the charms to suffer because of him.

I slung the crossbow over my shoulder and carried everything downstairs.

Scarlette gave me a look that dared me to object to her bringing the contract out to the hunter. With the sack of scales and the bow to deal with, I decided the extra set of hands wasn't a bad idea. I didn't want Gideon to grab things while I was dealing with the contract, especially since we had to bring out pen, ink, and something to write on since I refused to let him in the cottage. Besides, Scarlette pulled a thin stick partially from her pocket, waiting for me to notice it, before reaching for the doorknob.

I smiled. She still had the paralyzing enchantment I had given her. I'd have to see about making a stronger one, maybe fashioned as a bracelet, to replace the stick. But for now, it ought to suffice if the hunter tried anything. It should still have a couple of uses left.

Gideon wasn't surprised to see Scarlette. He must have heard us talking through the open window as easily as she had listened to our negotiations. He held out an imperious hand for the contract. She passed the paper to him, but he didn't start reading. "The scales?"

I opened the sack and lifted one iridescent green scale out, angling it back and forth in the sun. Then I dropped it back in with the others and held the bag open wide and angled it toward the hunter. "Three dozen."

He smiled. "I need a pen."

My eyes narrowed. He still hadn't read the contract. Before I could say anything, Scarlette stepped forward, holding out the pen, inkpot, and a book to write on.

Gideon lunged.

The world slowed. I saw the ink tumbling toward the ground, paper, pen, and book with it. Scarlette's hand reached for her pocket. Gideon reached for his knife.

I reached for the power of the node.

I pulled, the power coming in a rush since I stood so close to the source. I threw the magic outward. I could have paralyzed Gideon, the same use of healing magic as I had put into the stick. I could have stopped his heart. Instead, the power took the most familiar shape for me after days of practicing my shifting.

Learning to shed scales had given me a better understanding of what I did instinctually every time I transformed into a dragon. I knew how supple skin became hard scales; I recognized how organs shifted and altered. I didn't hesitate; the fear of making a mistake was nothing now.

I inverted the transformation, shrinking Gideon down until he became a lizard the size of a squirrel. Chain mail collapsed to the ground, and for a split second, a tiny dragon floated above the pile of clothes. Then he fell, his wings snapping out awkwardly as he tried to use an appendage that hadn't existed on his human body.

I ignored his struggles and rushed over to Scarlette. "Are you hurt?"

She gaped at me.

"Scarlette! Did he hurt you?"

She slowly closed her mouth and shook her head. Then pointed to where Gideon had stood moments before, her finger following the path of the lizard as it disappeared into the underbrush. "You transformed him. I thought you couldn't do that?"

"Some fears are greater than others. I couldn't let him grab you. The power responded to my desperation."

"You made a tiny dragon."

I nodded. "There's a legend that claims the first dragons were the creations of body-changers millennia ago. Though I don't plan on repeating the transformation, so I guess this new species will not survive."

"He's gone," Scarlette pointed out.

I shrugged. "What's he going to do?"

"I don't know, but shouldn't we . . ." She trailed off, clearly at a loss for what we should do.

"It's too late now. I changed him by instinct. I'm not sure I could transform him back into a human even if we caught him."

"But Rosalia or Grandmother—"

"No. Shifting another person is much harder. Not to mention, they have never shifted with a major size change, or between reptile and mammal before. They'd have just as much difficulty."

After a moment, Scarlette shook her head and bent to pick up the fallen contract supplies, grumbling about the spilled ink. "What are we going to do with his chain mail?"

"Store it in the attic and tell our grandchildren wild stories about why we have armor rusting away up there?"

Scarlette glanced up at me, her expression incredulous. “The truth isn’t wild enough for you?”

“We wouldn’t want to give them ideas. Look what happened to me thanks to reading a few old journals.”

She left everything on the ground and walked over to wrap her arms around me. “I don’t know. I rather like how that story turned out.”

I held her close. “It does look like it will have a happily ever after.”

She tilted her head back, her smile luminous. “One with grandchildren.”

“Eventually. I think we have plenty to be happy about for a while.”

“I think you are right.”

Twenty
Scarlette

"I'm too old to keep traveling back and forth all the time," Grandmother Molle announced over breakfast.

Rosalia had left the day before, promising to stop by Graenod with a note for my mother arranging the details of her move to Wulfkin.

Ranulf and I had spread the word that the huntsman wouldn't be bothering the residents of Drakona any longer, but only his twin and grandmother knew the truth of what had happened. We had spent a couple of days searching for the tiny dragon, but saw no sign of it. Ranulf insisted it meant that Gideon had grown comfortable enough in his new form to fend for himself. Rosalia considered the punishment poetic. Grandmother Molle shrugged and agreed that what was done, was done.

One night, Ranulf told me that even if he could, he wouldn't change his reaction when he saw Gideon reach for me. The fear of a knife against my throat wasn't something he ever wanted to live through. It made me realize that if I'd had the same power, I wouldn't have hesitated either. I knew the fear of Gideon hunting the man I loved, and I'd do anything to keep Ranulf safe. I had to accept he felt the same way about me.

And so, a week after that confrontation, everything was back to normal. As if it had never happened, except for the chain mail hauberk stashed in a corner of the attic. The villagers asked no questions.

"What do you mean?" I asked Grandmother Molle.

"Ranulf has to rely on charms out in Ortfel, which means I am far more helpful there."

Ranulf rolled his eyes. "Thanks, Nana."

"Hush. You know how isolated they are up by the mountains and how many accidents the miners have. They could use a full-time healer."

"You are talking about moving to the village," I realized.

Grandmother Molle smiled. “Exactly. They’d have a healer on hand as needed, and I wouldn’t have to run miles through the woods or rely on Ranulf to fly me.”

I exchanged a glance with Ranulf and knew he had reached the same conclusion as me. Grandmother Molle had found an excuse to grant us the privacy of a cottage all to ourselves.

I tried to judge how sincere her desire to live in the village was. “Are you certain, Grandmother? It would be harder for you to travel to Wulfkin.”

“I don’t need to travel to Wulfkin unless there is a true emergency. Ranulf and his charms are sufficient. The villagers aren’t as foolish there, in my experience. I don’t need to visit Wulfkin to socialize. I have friends in Ortfel. A cottage waiting for me.”

Ranulf blinked. Twice. “You have a cottage waiting for you?”

“It was my grandfather’s. My parents were like your mother and sister, needing to roam, but when I returned to the forest with my husband and a baby intending to stay, Grandpapa got us settled and then retired to a cottage in Ortfel. Now it is my turn to offer you two the same courtesy.”

“You aren’t a bother,” I felt compelled to tell her, though I had enjoyed the days when Ranulf and I shared the cottage with no one.

Grandmother Molle laughed. “Thank you, dear. If nothing else, at least if I leave, Ranulf won’t have to keep choking down my baking. The poor boy hasn’t dared to ask me to let you take over, but he’d clearly prefer to go back to your bread.”

I slapped a hand over my mouth to stifle a giggle. We’d had a conversation just that morning in bed about the fact that if he wanted me to make a loaf of bread, he was going to have to stop keeping me in bed past the time his grandmother got up to start the dough.

Ranulf went red, probably thinking about how he had convinced me to stay in bed. Not that I had truly protested. I wanted to bake for the tavern in Wulfkin, but that didn’t need to start immediately. I’d wait until my mother arrived and arrange a schedule with her and Mistress Weslet.

For now, I was more than content to putter around the cottage and garden, distracting Ranulf from his own work with a kiss whenever I wanted. Not that I was the one doing most of the distracting.

He cleared his throat. “You are certain, Nana?”

“Positive. It is time for the next generation of healers to take over.”

Thank you for reading *To Hunt a Ruby Remedy*. I hope you enjoyed it. If you have a moment and would like to leave a review on any platform, I'd really appreciate it. Your word of mouth recommendations are really the best help an author can get!

If you would like to read more fairy tale retellings set in this world, then be sure to check out the Once Upon an Enchantment series releasing Summer 2024. You can also sign up for my newsletter to get a novella and a couple short stories from my other series for free (and you won't miss a new release that way!). Keep turning the pages for a sneak peek at that novella.

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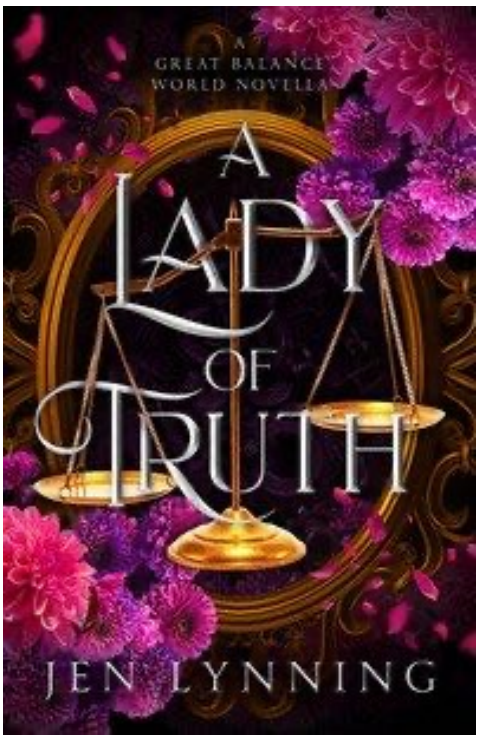

In a world of Balance, debts must be paid and change comes at a cost.

Eleya is well versed in the importance of keeping the Balance. To even the scales after her brother loses a fortune he doesn't have, she approaches the man he owes. Prince Dmir.

Dmir doesn’t know what to do with the lady sneaking into his room. She insists on an alternative method to repay her brother’s debt, but Dmir needs that money. He wants to fund Balanced inventions to bring progress to everyone in Plumei. As much as he is tempted to accept Eleya’s salacious proposal, he knows he shouldn’t. But maybe she can help him and work off the debt at the same time.

Eleya can’t help but commit fully to the principled, visionary prince once he shows her his plans. She will use all her powers, including a Balance-given ability to recognize the truth, to help him. But she can’t lie—she soon wants more than to repay the debt. She wants the prince himself.

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Turn the page to read Chapter 1

Chapter One

I was not committing treason. I had no right to be in the family wing of the imperial palace, but wandering away from the ballroom was not an act of treason in and of itself. That I had memorized the route to Prince Dmir's room showed premeditation, though I had hoped it wouldn't come to this. But it wasn't illegal.

On the other hand, entering his room as bold as I pleased without an invitation was certainly a dangerous approach to take. If he called the guards . . .

If he didn't . . .

Balance take it. If he had simply attended tonight's ball, I wouldn't have needed to sneak into his rooms. No, that wasn't fair. If my brother hadn't gambled away a small fortune, there would be no need for me to speak with the prince at all.

I didn't know what had come over Makev to make such a blunder. He was usually responsible, well aware of how our father reacted to mistakes. He provoked our father on a regular basis, but only with words. And after the last time? He knew better than to take such a risk and give Father an excuse to disown him. Losing money he didn't have was probably the worst possible offense in Father's eyes.

Makev had claimed the gin was at fault, saying he hadn't realized how much he had drunk until the morning after.

At least he had alcohol to blame. I had no one but myself to blame for tonight's act of foolishness.

My first stroke of good fortune of the evening came in the form of an unlocked door. I turned the knob and entered the prince's suite.

The sitting room was empty. Of people, at least. It was stuffed to overflowing with books. There were more in the one room than could be found in my entire house. None of my ancestors had put much store in the written word. Prince Dmir clearly did.

A shadow-light hung from the ceiling, the illuminated half of the sphere casting a blueish-white light over the room. More shadow-lights littered the room in stands on tables and hinged frames attached to chairs, but they had all been flipped so that the light halves were hidden. I didn't need any extra light, though.

With the way my luck was going, the prince wouldn't be in his suite at all. The unlocked door was the only instance when an obstacle hadn't been thrown in my path since learning of Makev's debt. After going through the trouble of securing an invitation to the imperial ball, however, I planned to check every room. I wasn't about to leave without being thorough, even if the odds were good that the prince was out winning another fortune he didn't need.

I made my way to the inner door and threw it open.

A single shadow-light on a stand by the bed cast a soft glow over the room and its inhabitant. Prince Dmir looked up and over at the doorway, his eyes wide.

My luck held—finally—and he did not shout for anyone to come drag me away.

"Your Highness." I curtseyed. The taffeta of my gown rustling was the only sound in the room. I kept my knees bent a moment longer than necessary, but the formal greeting hardly disguised the fact that I had barged into the prince's bedroom. Nor did it help me ignore the prince's bare chest, a few drops of water rolling over the smooth skin until they reached the waistband of his loose trousers.

I swallowed. I wasn't an inexperienced maiden, but I wasn't far from it, either. Nervous as I was, I still had some expectations for the evening, and Prince Dmir shirtless surpassed them.

The prince dropped the washcloth he had been holding next to the water basin. "Who are you, and what are you doing in my room?"

I wrenched my gaze back up to his face. No staring at his chest, I admonished myself. Look at the dark stubble along his chin instead. Maybe tonight wouldn't be as dreadful as I had feared. "I am Lady Eleya Poinar. I'm here on behalf of my brother."

"Your brother?" Prince Dmir grabbed the shirt tossed over the back of a nearby chair and slipped it on.

I watched skin disappear as he hastily buttoned the shirt. I wondered if he'd undo it again if I pointed out he had done the buttons askew. Given

what I was here to discuss, I decided not to bother. I forced myself to look up once more. Tonight certainly wouldn't be as bad as I had anticipated. The prince was hardly some odious old codger—he was barely a year older than I—but knowing it and seeing it so plainly on display were two different things.

Belatedly, I realized he wanted me to explain who my brother was. I needed to focus. "Makev Poinar. I know we haven't been introduced, but you know Makev. Everyone knows Makev, really. But you played cards with him for a full evening, so you must certainly know him. Unless the gin affected you even worse than him."

"I barely drank any."

"Makes sense, what with you winning."

"Lady Eleya, I know your brother, but that still does not explain your presence in my room."

"I am here to make a deal with you, Your Highness. I want to resolve Makev's debt myself."

"Why can't Makev pay? The Duke of Smagrav is one of the richest men in the entire empire."

I heard the prince's scorn and wondered what my father had done to earn it. I didn't doubt for a moment he deserved it.

"Well, yes, but Makev isn't the Duke of Smagrav, yet. He does not have access to those funds. And it would be unfortunate if Father learned Makev had lost so much money in a gaming hell." Unfortunate was an understatement.

"But you can pay his debt?"

"Well, I can't pay it with money. Father doesn't allow me access to his fortune any more than Makev." I swallowed, but it was easier to say the next words than I had expected. Seeing the prince half naked had given curiosity the upper-hand over nervousness. Though perhaps curiosity wasn't the best description of the feeling sending warmth through my blood. "I am willing to negotiate terms to pay off the debt some other way."

Prince Dmir didn't hesitate. "No."

"I'll be honest, Your Highness." I was always honest, actually, but he didn't know that. "I am desperate enough to agree to pretty much anything. Please, name your terms."

"No."

Maybe he didn't understand what I was offering—or didn't believe I'd really make the offer. No point in being missish about saying the words, all things considered. I crossed my arms. "I'm saying I'll sleep with you—as often as you deem necessary to pay the debt in full."

Given the sum Makev had lost, the prince could demand quite a lot. I didn't know how much a single night should be valued at, but even if he wanted more than seemed reasonable, I wouldn't balk. I figured so long as he wasn't cruel—and nothing I had heard about Prince Dmir implied he was—after the first time, what did it matter? If that's what it took to protect my brother, then fine.

"I understood you, Lady Eleya. My answer is still no."

"Listen, I know I'm not the most beautiful—"

"Stop." He held up his hands as if to ward me off. "It's forgiven. Your brother's debt is forgiven. There."

I frowned. "I know how much he lost. No one would just forgive a debt of that size. I'm not going to walk away so that you can come after him tomorrow."

"I will sign a contract saying it is forgiven, if that is what you require."

I wanted to help my brother, but I didn't want the prince's pity either. "No. I said I would pay it off, and I will. I just can't pay it off in coin. If I'm too repulsive for your taste, fine, but I am not leaving until we reach an agreement."

"I didn't say you were repulsive."

"I am practically throwing myself at you, but you would rather lose three thousand crowns than sleep with me. I can read between the lines."

"I'd rather lose three thousand crowns I don't even have than take advantage of you that way."

I threw up my hands. "But I don't have any other way to pay off the debt!"

"Then walk away. Consider the debt paid in full."

"Debts don't work like that, Your Highness. I will not walk away with the scales unbalanced between us." My voice rose, desperation getting the better of me.

I had imagined so many outcomes to this evening. Meeting the prince—well, seeing him half-naked—had given me hope that resolving Makev's debt might become something I enjoyed. But even in my worst-case scenarios, I hadn't imagined Prince Dmir might refuse me completely. I

couldn't accept his offer to wipe out the debt, Balance take it. I fully admitted that pride meant I didn't want his pity, but that wasn't the reason I refused to walk away. Debts always end up being paid, one way or another. I'd rather pay this one on my terms.

My hands became fists at my sides. My fingernails dug into my palms. "You must let me work off the debt."

The prince crossed his arms. "Are you afraid I'll go back on my word? Is that why you won't walk away?"

"It has nothing to do with your honor." I knew he was telling the truth about forgiving the debt. But that wasn't the point. My voice rose, frustration getting the better of me. "It has to do with Balance. Surely you understand the importance, Your Highness. Refuse my offer if you must, but don't leave this debt weighing on me. Pretending it doesn't exist won't solve the problem."

"And what will?" Dmir's eyes were wide.

"Repaying the debt! There must be a way I can do so without repulsing you."

"I'll hire you as my secretary!" The prince was nearly shouting now, matching my volume.

The shock on his own face after the words spilled out was enough to make me stop and think before replying. I didn't have the qualifications to be a secretary. I could read, of course. I even spoke several languages, including Ancient Koreini, but secretaries *knew* things. My best friend, Ketira, would have made an excellent secretary. She was scholarly enough —or she had been until her recent fervor to find a husband had taken over. But no one had ever lumped me in among the ranks of bluestockings. The position would be a sham, a way to placate me.

I supposed that wasn't any worse than becoming the prince's mistress in order to pay off the debt. It would even the scales, at least a little. On the other hand, Makev was more likely to notice my comings and goings during the day. He didn't know about my plan to resolve his debt, and I'd rather it stayed that way. If he discovered what I was up to, he'd probably inform Father himself about the debt in order to pay it off. The risk of Father disowning him over losing the money was too great.

"I accept, but on one condition."

Prince Dmir's eyes narrowed. "What?"

“I don’t want you to publicize my new position. I can’t be seen as your new secretary.”

“You can’t . . . be seen?” The prince gaped at me. “You barged into my room in the middle of the night proposing to become my mistress, but you’re worried about people seeing you as my secretary?”

“It’s hardly the middle of the night.” There were at least a hundred people in the palace ballroom as we spoke, none of whom would think of retiring for hours yet. “That’s beside the point, though. If people find out I’m your mistress, they won’t wonder why. I mean, they might wonder why you would pick me, of all people, but they won’t wonder about *my* motivations.”

“Lady Eleya, you are the daughter of a duke. Why would you be any man’s mistress? Wouldn’t you expect a gentleman to offer you marriage instead?”

“You are a prince, not a mere gentleman.”

“I’m the younger, more boring prince.”

“And the only one within reach at present. Not that I’d ever consider an affair with Prince Kivan—he’s engaged, after all.”

“So, you do expect marriage.”

“What? No. It has nothing to do with the possibility of me marrying him. I wouldn’t do that to Princess Josyn. She has the right to expect fidelity from her fiancé.”

“I’m fairly certain she knows better than to expect that of Kivan.”

She probably did. The Lyran princess was no fool, and she would know how to interpret the crown prince’s surprise decision to tour Plumei’s overseas colonies months before she reached her majority. They had been engaged since childhood, but Prince Kivan fled before his mother could insist on their wedding.

“That’s not the point. I won’t be the woman tempting her fiancé to stray.” I frowned. “Why are we talking about me becoming your brother’s mistress?”

Dmir threw his hands up in the air. “I don’t know. You’re the one who brought it up.”

“Well, anyway, my point remains. People will wonder if I am suddenly working as your secretary. I don’t want to invite such scrutiny.”

“I won’t tell anyone, Lady Eleya.”

“Then we have a deal.”

“Where are you off to this morning?” Makev yawned as he shuffled past me to the sideboard.

“The palace.” I paused on my way out of the room and went back to pour Makev a cup of tea. Maybe the kind gesture would be enough to keep him from asking any more questions.

No such luck.

“The palace? What business do you have there?”

“I forgot something last night at the ball.”

What I had forgotten was to ask Prince Dmir where or when he wanted me to start my new job as his secretary. He probably hoped I’d give up. He’d learn better soon. Lady Eleya Sonita Poinar did not give up.

It didn’t occur to Makev to wonder what I might have forgotten, or why I didn’t send a servant to fetch it. He took everything I said at face value. It always amused me that it was easier to deceive him, the one person who knew about my inability to lie, than anyone else.

I had told Makev about the korengal I had cast in order to sense lies within minutes of successfully wording the spell-prayer. It had taken months of research, experiments, and obliquely questioning Ketira (whose understanding of Ancient Koreini far surpassed mine) to craft a korengal the Watcher deemed Balanced enough to grant.

After being fooled by Nikolo Durenyi’s lies, I had considered the time and effort well spent.

At barely nineteen, I had thought myself so wise when I met Nikolo. When he claimed to have no interest in my family’s fortune, I had believed him. Not because I thought he was in love with me—I hadn’t fallen for any of the men clearly flattering me in hopes of getting their hands on a large dowry—but because Nikolo had never spoken of a future or deep feelings. I had believed his motivations to be honest, if not pure.

Then he approached my father in secret and claimed to have gotten me pregnant. Liaisons only raised brows among a certain set, but pregnancy? Among the nobility, pregnancy had to happen within the confines of a marriage. Which was why I had made sure I wouldn’t get pregnant while I was with Nikolo.

In the end, everything worked out for the best. Once his plan fell apart, Nikolo spread the word about how meager my dowry was. Two years later,

and the fortune-hunters still never sought me out. I hadn't known how effective Nikolo's gossip would be at scaring them away at the time, though. I had developed the korengal that allowed me to detect lies so that I would never make such a mistake again.

After scores of unsuccessful attempts, I had shared my triumph with Makev immediately. I could no longer lie, and I needed to test the new ability I had received in exchange. Of course, I hadn't told him how much wriggle room I had left myself. I could only sense outright lies, not prevarications or misdirections. To Balance that sense, I could not speak an outright lie, but I could prevaricate and misdirect with the best of them.

But to Makev, everything was black and white. He'd see me taking on his debt as black. So I didn't tell him what I had truly forgotten at the palace.

"Hopefully, some other lady didn't take it by mistake," Makev said. He sat down to break his fast, and I set off for the palace.

Despite Father's general stinginess, I had the use of a steam carriage whenever I needed one. He believed in maintaining appearances, and the Duke of Smagrav and his family must have the latest conveniences if anyone were to see them. If no one was about to see us, then the only person's convenience that mattered was Father's.

Not taking the carriage was harder than slipping past Makev without letting him know my true purpose. I convinced the servants that I wanted to walk, which was the truth only because walking prevented a driver from accompanying me.

I'd have to think of a better excuse if I wanted to continue meeting the prince without the entire household knowing my whereabouts. And everyone else in Tarân, for that matter. The steam carriages were still few and far between, even in the capital of Plumei.

My first priority, however, was learning where to meet the prince to accomplish my duties as a secretary.

The walk from our house to the palace was not long. The cobblestone streets were wide and bright in this section of the city, and it was early enough that few carriages—steam or horse-drawn—passed me by. A breeze made the summer heat bearable, and I found I actually enjoyed the chance to stretch my legs. My excuse of wanting to walk would work a little longer if the activity remained pleasant.

I entered the palace grounds through a garden, allowing me to meander while I waited for someone to come into view. While I admired the dahlias just starting to bloom, a servant exited the palace. I set my course to intercept him.

"Excuse me, is Prince Dmir in residence currently?"

Asking a random servant probably wasn't any better than announcing myself at the front door, but I had some small hope of keeping my new position as a secretary quiet this way. Explaining that development to my brother would test the limits of my ability to lie.

The servant looked at me with wide eyes. "I couldn't say, my lady."

Of course not. He couldn't even give me a simple yes or no, which meant my korengal powered ability to sense the truth was useless. Either he didn't know, or he wasn't at liberty to divulge the whereabouts of the imperial family to random ladies in the palace gardens.

"Well, thank you."

"Of course, my lady."

He scurried away, and I waited for another servant to come out, not expecting any better results.

Walking around that garden, it felt like I made up for a month of sitting in steam carriages. The second servant was no more helpful than the first, and the morning was fast slipping away. It had taken an invitation to the imperial ball for me to get face-to-face with the prince the first time for a reason.

I decided to try one more servant before conceding defeat for the day. Not that I'd give up for good. If I had to, I'd knock on the palace doors myself. Hopefully, I could find another way before it came to that.

The next person to enter the grounds was not a servant. Princess Josyn spotted me before I could decide if her attention would be better or worse than knocking on the palace doors.

"Lady Eleya," she called out, her voice without inflection, as usual. "What a surprise to find you here. Do you often tour the gardens?"

"No, Your Highness, but I'm beginning to think I should. I believe the dahlias will be particularly impressive once they are in full bloom."

The princess closed the distance between us. "I'm partial to the peonies myself, but they are already done for the season. There's something to be said for a flower that both looks and smells magnificent."

"You have a point, Your Highness."

“Dmir isn’t in the palace this morning,” Josyn told me, her expression never changing. No smugness at knowing my reason for visiting the garden. No delight in surprising me.

Most of the court called her the Ice Princess. Between her gray-blue eyes, and silver-blond hair, the name fit even without taking into account the way she never showed emotion. She was a princess of the neighboring Lyr, not Plumei, but she had been raised to be our next empress. She had lived in Tarân for the past seven years. Once Crown Prince Kivan returned from his visit to our overseas colonies, they’d marry, and Josyn would be a princess of Plumei in truth. When the Empress died, Kivan would inherit the throne, but everyone knew Josyn would rule.

I had no idea what she thought of me seeking out her future brother-in-law.

“Did one of the servants mention my questions, or—” I cut myself off just in time. No need to volunteer details.

The princess actually smiled, a slight upward tilt at the corners of her mouth. “Or did I know you had been in his rooms last night?”

I winced.

“Dmir left the palace early this morning,” Princess Josyn told me, as if my presence in the prince’s room the night before meant nothing. Well, if she knew I had gone in, she probably knew I had come out again after too short a time to have done anything.

“Do you know where he went?”

“No.”

She was telling the truth, Balance take it.

“But I know how to find him.”

“You do? Will you . . . I mean, I’d greatly appreciate it if you would help me find him, Your Highness.”

“Of course.” She smiled once more, the expression subtle yet clear, and led the way down the paths to the palace. “I’m not actually made of ice, you know.”

“I know, but that doesn’t mean you’d want to help me chase down the prince.”

“On the contrary, it means that I am overjoyed to help you chase him down. I look forward to seeing him caught; he’s too serious for his own good.”

I blushed. “It’s not like that.”

Princess Josyn ushered me inside the palace. “Lady Eleya, you snuck into his bedroom last night.”

“And he wanted nothing to do with me.”

“He asked questions about you this morning.”

I looked at the princess in suspicion. I knew she had told the truth, but I still couldn’t believe it. “He did?”

“I think you made an impression on him last night.”

I laughed. “I guess you could say that. I certainly made sure he noticed me. I suppose it would be odder if he didn’t ask questions about me this morning. Let me guess, the first question was whether I am insane?”

Princess Josyn turned down a corridor lit only by a few shadow-lights up near the ceiling. A servant’s passage. “I believe it had something to do with your suitors, actually.”

I didn’t taste the bitterness of a lie when she spoke, and searched for a way she could be misleading me. “Do you mean he asked after my dowry?”

“Why would he care about your dowry?”

Because it told him exactly how much money I had to my name. It made more sense than him asking about my suitors—which were practically nonexistent, since my dowry was considerably smaller than expected for the daughter of the Duke of Smagrav. A connection to my father was supposed to balance out the paltry sum, but anyone who met His Grace wanted more money, not less, to be related to him.

The princess had a point, though. “I suppose he wouldn’t.”

Dmir would have no interest in securing my measly fortune through marriage. Despite his protestations about taking advantage, I was fairly certain fear of being trapped into a marriage had played the biggest role in making him turn down my original offer. I didn’t blame him for that. No one wanted to marry me after Nikolo trumpeted my pitiful dowry far and wide.

I was too average. Not plain, but not beautiful. My features were all forgettable, from my brown hair that was neither straight nor curly to my hazel eyes. Beyond the physical, I was still just average. Not foolish, but not witty. Not unconnected, but not rich. I was safe enough to have around to fill out a card table or ballroom—not a threat to my host’s daughters, and never one to cause a scandal. In short, I was boring.

I had never before done something as outrageous as I had last night. Maybe I had caught the prince’s attention, but I wouldn’t hold it for long. A

handsome man in his early twenties, let alone one who was also an imperial prince, could find plenty of women more alluring than I without even trying.

We exited the servant's passage, and I recognized the hallway. Prince Dmir's room was around the next bend. Josyn took me to a door on the right instead.

"Mili," Josyn called out as soon as she was through the door. "We have a guest."

Another woman stepped into the sitting room from deeper inside the suite. She was dressed in charcoal gray with a touch of snowy white lace at her throat and cuffs. An apron cinched tight around her waist and a matching cap covered most of her hair. A lady's maid, though she was to my maid what Princess Josyn was to a flower-seller. Mili no doubt had more power than I did at court, and she was certainly better informed than me.

The princess ignored the look her maid gave her. "Lady Eleya is trying to track down Dmir."

I gaped. Gone was the Ice Princess. Even the small smiles she had given me in the garden were nothing compared to this. Her entire face was suddenly alight with mischief.

I looked over at Mili and discovered the maid had a similar expression. "Is she now?"

"I thought I should be a good future sister and make sure Dmir didn't miss her."

"Very thoughtful of you, Your Highness."

I considered Mili for a moment. "Are you the reason Her Highness knew I had been in the prince's rooms?"

The maid chortled. "The prince's insistence on not keeping a regular valet has more to do with it than anything."

"But if he doesn't have a valet around, doesn't that mean he's less likely to be watched?"

"But a good valet would be loyal to him and keep any chatter to a minimum. Instead, the servants who tend him will gossip about anything they find interesting."

"But there weren't any servants around."

Mili laughed harder. "Not that you saw. Trust me, there are always servants around."

“So, which ones saw where Prince Dmir went this morning?”

The princess patted my hand. “That is the important question. Mili will find out.”

The maid sauntered over to the door. “Child’s play.”

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About the Author

Jen Lynning never outgrew her love of fairy tales. (She may have studied German just so she could read the Brothers Grimm in the original.) When she wasn't reading about life in a magical world, she was imagining it. Eventually she decided to start writing her own stories where magic and romance meet.

Jen lives in Northern Virginia with her two cats, who make their own contributions to her writing by walking across the keyboard, and her bird, who offers commentary on the whole process.

Visit jenlynning.com to see what's coming next and sign up for Jen's newsletter. Newsletter subscribers will receive a free novella and short story.

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